



Washington State Fusion Center INFOCUS



FRIDAY — 18 FEB 2022

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HEADLINE	02/18 East Ukraine worst shelling in years
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SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/shelling-breaks-out-east-ukraine-west-moscow-dispute-troop-moves-2022-02-17/
GIST	<p>MOSCOW/KYIV, Feb 18 (Reuters) - Russian-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine said on Friday they planned to evacuate their breakaway region's residents to Russia, a stunning turn in a conflict the West believes Moscow could use to justify an invasion of Ukraine.</p> <p>Announcing the move on social media, Denis Pushilin, head of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic, said Russia had agreed to provide accommodation for those who leave. Women, children and the elderly should be evacuated first.</p> <p>There was no immediate comment from Russian officials or from Kyiv. Millions of civilians are believed to live in the two rebel-held regions of eastern Ukraine; most are Russian speakers and many have already been granted Russian citizenship.</p> <p>The eastern Ukraine conflict zone saw the most intense artillery bombardment for years on Friday, with the Kyiv government and the separatists trading blame. Western countries have said they think the shelling, which began on Thursday and intensified in its second day, is part of a pretext to invade.</p> <p>The United States said Russia - which says it has started drawing down troops near Ukraine this week - had done the opposite: ramping up the force menacing its neighbour to between 169,000 and 190,000 troops, from 100,000 at the end of January.</p> <p>"This is the most significant military mobilisation in Europe since the Second World War," U.S. ambassador Michael Carpenter told a meeting at the Vienna-based Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.</p> <p>A diplomatic source with years of direct experience of the conflict described shelling in eastern Ukraine as the most intense since major combat there ended with a 2015 ceasefire.</p> <p>'THEY ARE SHOOTING'</p> <p>Close to 600 explosions were recorded on Friday morning, 100 more than on Thursday, some involving 152 mm and 122 mm artillery and large mortars, the source said. At least four rounds had been fired from tanks.</p> <p>"They are shooting - everyone and everything," said the source. "There's been nothing like this since 2014-15."</p> <p>Other officials have disputed that characterisation, noting that there had been periods of deadly fighting during the ceasefire, and that there were no reports so far of deaths at the frontline this week.</p> <p>Russia denies Western accusations it is planning an all-out invasion of Ukraine, a country of over 40 million people, in what would potentially be Europe's biggest war in generations.</p> <p>Western countries have said this week that Russian troops are making the sort of preparations normally seen in the final days before an attack, which could come within days.</p> <p>Moscow, for its part, said it was closely watching the escalation of shelling in eastern Ukraine, where government troops have faced Moscow-backed rebels since 2014. It described the situation as potentially very dangerous.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/18 Russia alarm over shelling increase
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-says-sharp-increase-shelling-donbass-is-alarminq-2022-02-18/

GIST	<p>MOSCOW, Feb 18 (Reuters) - Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov voiced alarm on Friday over a sharp increase in shelling in eastern Ukraine and accused the OSCE special monitoring mission of glossing over what he said were Ukrainian violations of the peace process.</p> <p>Ukrainian government forces and pro-Russian separatists have been fighting in the Donbass region of eastern Ukraine since 2014 in a conflict that Kyiv says has claimed some 15,000 lives.</p> <p>Washington and its allies have raised fears that the upsurge in violence in the Donbass could form part of a Russian pretext to invade Ukraine. Tensions are already high over a Russian military buildup to the north, east and south of Ukraine.</p> <p>Moscow denies planning an invasion.</p> <p>"We are very concerned by the reports of recent days - yesterday and the day before there was a sharp increase in shelling using weapons that are prohibited under the Minsk agreements," Lavrov said, referring to peace accords aimed at ending the conflict.</p> <p>"So far we are seeing the special monitoring mission is doing its best to smooth over all questions that point to the blame of Ukraine's armed forces," he told a news conference.</p> <p>Ukraine's military on Friday denied violating the Minsk peace process and accused Moscow of waging an information war to say that Kyiv was shelling civilians, allegations it said were lies and designed to provoke it.</p> <p>Russia has said it is pulling some troops away from areas near its borders with Ukraine following military exercises, but the West says that Moscow, on the contrary, is still building up its forces.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/18 Shelling intensifies eastern Ukraine
SOURCE	https://www.cbsnews.com/news/russia-ukraine-news-shelling-donbas-buildup-latest-us-invasion-pretext-blinken-lavrov/
GIST	<p>Kyiv — Ukrainian forces and the pro-Russian separatists they're fighting in the country's east reported a second day of increased shelling on Friday. Western leaders say an escalation in the fighting in Ukraine's Donbas region — which has simmered for almost eight years — could be part of Russian efforts to create a pretext to invade.</p> <p>The reports come as America's defense chief said the United States had still seen no drawdown of the Russian forces massed around Ukraine's borders. The U.S. envoy to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, which was meeting in Germany on Friday, said the Russian deployment around Ukraine's borders had actually swelled to between 169,000 and 190,000 troops — the biggest military buildup in Europe since World War II.</p> <p>"Although Russia has announced it is moving its forces back to garrison, we have yet to see that. In fact, we see more forces moving into that region, that border region," U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin said during a press conference alongside his Polish counterpart on Friday. "We also see them going through, continuing to prepare, by doing things you'd expect elements — military elements — to do as they were preparing to launch an attack."</p> <p>But Russia continued issuing new claims that some of its soldiers and weapons were returning to their bases after planned military exercises, even as the Kremlin said President Vladimir Putin would personally oversee massive naval drills on Saturday involving the country's nuclear forces.</p> <p>On Thursday, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken gave a stark assessment of the situation to the U.N. Security Council, saying Washington believed Russia was planning a full-scale attack on Ukraine. He</p>

	<p>echoed what President Joe Biden had said, that the U.S. believes Russia is trying to manufacture an excuse for war.</p> <p>"We have reason to believe they are engaged in a false-flag operation to have an excuse to go in," Mr. Biden said.</p> <p>The president is scheduled to host a call on Friday with the leaders of NATO, the European Union, Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Poland and Romania.</p> <p>The Russians have responded with proposed dates for late next week, which we are accepting, provided there is no further Russian invasion of Ukraine. If they do invade in the coming days, it will make clear they were never serious about diplomacy.</p> <p>— Ned Price (@StateDeptSpox) February 18, 2022</p> <p>Blinken, meanwhile, was in Munich with Vice President Kamala Harris for a security conference, but his spokesman announced overnight that he is now scheduled to meet Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov "late next week," unless Russia invades.</p> <p>Even the news of their meeting — and the timing of it — appeared to calm turmoil in financial markets, which have been on edge over the possibility of war in Europe.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/18 Middle-school children fentanyl ODs
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2022/02/18/health/fentanyl-fatal-overdoses-middle-schoolers/index.html
GIST	<p>(CNN)At age 14, Alexander Neville was still very much a curious kid. He was a Boy Scout who enjoyed getting outdoors and camping. He played with Legos and liked to skateboard. He slept with a stuffed Iron Man figure and still snuggled with a teddy bear he'd had since he was much younger.</p> <p>But about a year and a half ago, the middle schooler confessed to his parents about a very adult problem: He was experimenting with oxycodone, a prescription painkiller.</p> <p>He had no idea that the pills he was taking were actually prescription knockoffs laced with fentanyl, a synthetic opioid. Just a few milligrams of fentanyl can be a fatal dose.</p> <p>One morning in June 2020, his mother, Amy, found him dead in his bedroom.</p> <p>"I went to his room, and he was blue, just laying on his beanbag chair. Just like he had gone to bed, you know, just like he had fallen asleep there," she said.</p> <p>Drug deaths more than double Though still rare, drug deaths among children ages 10 to 14 more than tripled from 2019 to 2020, according to an analysis done for CNN by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.</p> <p>Unintentional drug overdoses led to 200,000 years of lost life for US preteens and teens who died between 2015 and 2019, a January study found. And experts suspect that the problem has gotten worse during the pandemic, research shows.</p> <p>The trend among adolescents follows a wider one.</p> <p>Annual drug overdose deaths have reached another record high in the United States, with an estimated 104,288 in the 12-month period ending September 2021, according to provisional data published Wednesday by the CDC's National Center for Health Statistics.</p> <p>That's double the number from six years prior; there were an estimated 52,000 drug overdose deaths annually in September 2015.</p>

The fentanyl factor

Alexander Neville had gone to his parents to ask them for help just two days before he died. He told them he had started on the pills, in large part, because he was curious.

"He said, 'I got to tell you something. I wanted to experiment with oxy -- oxycodone. I looked up how much to take for my size, so I wouldn't get addicted. But it really has got a hold on me. And I don't know why,' " his mother said.

His parents immediately made calls to get him into treatment.

"He really wanted to stop completely," Alexander's father, Aaron, recalled.

Amy remembered, "He wanted to be done. He's like, 'I'm done. I thought this stuff was going to be fun, but it's not.' " But Alexander took that one last pill, unaware it was actually a deadly fake.

Tests later showed that the pill had enough fentanyl in it to kill at least four people, according to a toxicology report that his parents obtained.

[Fentanyl](#) is a drug intended to help people like cancer patients manage severe pain. It's 50 to 100 times more potent than morphine. But most overdose deaths aren't from using it legitimately; rather, they are linked to fentanyl made illegally. Four out of every 10 fake pills with fentanyl contain a potentially deadly dose, according to the [Drug Enforcement Administration](#).

Since 2013, a rise in opioid deaths involved illicitly made fentanyl, [according to the CDC](#). The agency says dealers combine it with counterfeit prescription pills, cocaine and heroin.

During the pandemic, the spike in deaths has increased significantly. From May 2020 through April 2021, more than 100,000 people of all ages died from drug overdoses in the US, [according to the CDC](#). That's a record -- a near-30% rise from a year earlier and a near doubling over the past five years. Synthetic opioids like fentanyl accounted for the bulk of those deaths -- around 64,000.

"We're dealing with a different drug threat. Fentanyl has changed the game," DEA Special Agent Robert Murphy said. "I've been in law enforcement my entire adult life -- so it's 31 years now. And I've never seen a threat of the drug threat like the one we're dealing with now. It's frightening."

Social media makes drug deals easy

Social media may also contribute to the problem. Drug dealers no longer have to stand on streetcorners. They can now connect with kids online through platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and YouTube, Murphy said.

Alexander's parents believe that he got his fake pills through Snapchat. Another parent in the area got in touch to tell them that her son died two weeks after Alexander did, and she had screengrabs of a conversation believed to be with a drug dealer through Snapchat. There's still an investigation underway.

"The fentanyl epidemic has had a devastating effect on the lives of too many Americans, and our hearts go out to the families who have suffered unimaginable losses," a Snap spokesperson said in a statement to CNN.

"We share their outrage over how drug dealers have abused online platforms, including Snapchat, and are working tirelessly to eradicate them from our platform. We use tools to proactively detect drug-dealing activity and shut down dealers. To help inform our ongoing strategy and efforts, we work closely with a wide range of experts in counternarcotics, the law enforcement community, and government agencies, including the Drug Enforcement Agency, as well as with families. We are committed to bringing every resource to bear to fight this national crisis both on Snapchat and across the tech industry, particularly by raising awareness about the dangers of counterfeit pills laced with fentanyl."

Buying drugs is as easy as planting a string of emojis on a social media platform to signal the interest in a sale, Murphy said. The DEA says drug traffickers and the criminal networks are there waiting for you.

Dealers may reassure people that their pills are fentanyl-free, but there's no easy way to tell by looking at them, nor is it easy to know how much fentanyl is in them.

"That's why it could be a 'one pill kill,' because we don't know the dose," said Dr. Robert Bassett, assistant associate director of the Poison Control Center at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. "It's like driving at night with your headlights off."

The opioid overdose antidote

Fentanyl has become such a big problem among young people that some schools have started keeping naloxone, an antidote to opioid overdoses that's available under the brand name Narcan, on hand.

Hartford, Connecticut, is one example. In January, a 13-year-old boy died after collapsing in gym class at a Hartford school. [Two other seventh-graders](#) were taken to Connecticut Children's for treatment and evaluation. [Police found](#) 40 bags of fentanyl at the school and 100 bags in boy's bedroom.

On Tuesday, the American Medical Association encouraged the Biden administration to remove the prescription status of naloxone to make it more easily available over the counter.

All 50 states and the District of Columbia have some form of naloxone access laws that allow for the prescribing and dispensing of the treatment to substance users vulnerable to overdose and to nonmedical first responders like family and friends, according to the [Legislative Analysis and Public Policy Association](#). As of 2020, at least 20 states allow schools to possess naloxone and administer it, but they are not required to do so.

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HEADLINE	02/17 Amazon halts BLM from charity program
SOURCE	https://www.foxbusiness.com/politics/amazon-black-lives-matter-charity-website
GIST	<p>Amazon's charity website has suspended the Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation (BLMGNF) amid questions about the group's financial transparency.</p> <p>AmazonSmile, which donates 0.5% from purchases to designated nonprofits, still lists dozens of local Black Lives Matter (BLM) chapters among its thousands of approved charities, but noticeably absent is the BLMGNF, the national arm of the BLM movement.</p> <p>"We offer the AmazonSmile program to make it easy for our customers to support their favorite charitable organizations, and we work to offer a broad spectrum of organizations, including those working to end racial injustice," an Amazon spokesperson told Fox News Digital. "States have rules for nonprofits, and organizations participating in AmazonSmile need to meet those rules. Unfortunately this organization fell out of compliance with the rules in several states, so we've had to temporarily suspend them from the program until they come into compliance.</p> <p>"We hope that happens soon, and in the meantime, customers who have already selected them in AmazonSmile are able to continue supporting them, and we'll hold any funds accrued until they're back in compliance."</p> <p>The suspension was first reported by the Washington Examiner.</p> <p>The news comes after BLMGNF shut down all of its online fundraising earlier this month following demands by attorneys general in California and Washington state that it submit delinquent financial disclosures for 2020, the Examiner reported.</p>

	<p>"We take these matters seriously and have taken immediate action," a BLMGNF spokesperson told FOX Business on Feb. 3. "We have immediately engaged compliance counsel to address any issues related to state fundraising compliance. In the interim, we have shut down online fundraising as we work quickly to ensure we are meeting all compliance requirements."</p> <p>However, BLMGNF remained out of compliance in California, Washington, New Jersey, North Carolina, Connecticut, Colorado, Maryland, Maine and Virginia as of Wednesday, the Examiner reported.</p> <p>At the end of 2020, Black Lives Matter said in an impact report that it raised \$90 million, spent \$8.4 million in operating expenses, distributed \$21.7 million in grants to 33 other organizations, and closed the year with a \$60 million balance. An investigation conducted by the Examiner found that BLM has not publicly named anyone in charge of the roughly \$60 million bankroll since its co-founder, Patrisse Cullors, resigned in May 2021.</p> <p>According to the right-leaning charity watchdog Influence Watch, it is not clear who leads BLMGNF.</p> <p>Multiple local BLM chapters and families of Black people killed by police have spoken out against the BLMGNF and demanded it disburse its millions to Black communities.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/17 Monitor: FBI aware SPD sex violence
SOURCE	https://southseattleemerald.com/2022/02/17/federal-monitor-claims-fbi-aware-of-alleged-spd-sexual-violence/
GIST	<p>More than two months ago, lawyer Sarah Lippek approached federal monitor Dr. Antonio Oftelie on LinkedIn about alleged sexual abuse of vulnerable people — including homeless youth, sex workers, unhoused individuals, and drug users — by Seattle Police Department (SPD) officers.</p> <p>But instead of giving the information Lippek would eventually send him to the Department of Justice (DOJ) or the federal court, as she asked, Oftelie gave Lippek's contact information to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).</p> <p>The FBI is not part of the Consent Decree process, but the DOJ and the federal court are — and presumably, Oftelie is in contact with the DOJ and the federal court on a regular basis, because of his specific role in the Consent Decree. Sending this information to the FBI would be akin to starting over, Lippek told the <i>Emerald</i>, because the federal investigation that led to the Consent Decree already happened 10 years ago.</p> <p>"The Consent Decree Monitor saying he gave my information to the FBI months ago is akin to him telling me that nothing is going to happen, or the issue of police sexual misconduct is not going to be addressed," Lippek said. "If the monitoring team was looking to work collaboratively with the community on the issue of police sexual violence, then the community should have been consulted regarding the FBI's involvement. He could have sent me an email months ago. ... Telling me months later is not collaboration. It is vaguely threatening."</p> <p>And this specific issue was identified in a survey almost 10 years ago, but somewhere along the way, the data Lippek is talking about was buried. Police sexual misconduct has never been part of the official conversation about what's wrong with SPD, Lippek told the <i>Emerald</i>.</p> <p>After Lippek contacted him on LinkedIn, Oftelie asked her for more information in a Nov. 26, 2021, email. In a follow-up email to him on Nov. 28, 2021, Lippek pointed Oftelie to data regarding alleged sexual abuse by SPD officers that has been stored by a University of Washington (UW) professor. Lippek told Oftelie that the data — collected in 2013 by a team under the umbrella of the People's Harm Reduction Alliance (PHRA) that included the PHRA executive director, a Ph.D. student, aforementioned UW professor, and Lippek — had been provided to the City, but that she was unsure what happened to it after that. She told Oftelie in this email that she had no idea whether the data had been submitted to the Department of Justice (DOJ), but that "[w]hen the City's reports on the community surveys were released</p>

publicly, some PHRA participation was apparently included in some data sets, but it did not appear that the data about sexual abuse was published or acknowledged, even as individual comments.”

Lippek also told Oftelie that when she worked as an Office of Inspector General (OIG) investigator in 2018, she reviewed more than 1,100 Office of Police Accountability (OPA) complaints.

And in those complaints, she said, she “found serious, credible allegations of sexual assault and harassment buried in the OPA ‘contact logs’ and ignored, or kept in perpetual suspension while investigative procedures were ‘paused’ and unresumed for years at a time, allowing officers to retire with full pensions and without any disciplinary mark.”

After this email, Oftelie went quiet. Lippek didn’t hear from him again for months. It was only after she again [left public comments](#) on one of Oftelie’s [LinkedIn posts](#) — and followed up with Oftelie via email about his comment at the CPC’s Community Engagement meeting on Feb. 8, 2022, in which [he mentioned](#) that the FBI had allegedly been notified about the reported sexual abuse data — that Oftelie emailed her back.

In this email, dated Feb. 9, 2022, Oftelie said that he “referred you’re [sic] inquiry to FBI approximately two months ago. Did anyone from the FBI contact you to follow-up?

“If not, I’ll likely have to pursue this with the monitoring team. I’ll need to get the [federal] Court to give me an okay on that (the monitoring team does not look at individual cases generally),” Oftelie said in his email to Lippek.

Lippek responded that she had not received any follow-up from the FBI, either via email or phone. She also clarified that her request to Oftelie was “not that the monitoring team look at any individual cases, but that the monitoring team examine **patterns** of alleged abuse against multiple people, which are indicated by a variety of sources.

“The matter of Captain Woolery’s arrest is an example of a pattern, and is particularly notable because it’s currently apparently unresolved and has not resulted in any inquiry into Captain Woolery’s command duties, his participation in the force review process, or **any other ways in which his decision-making potentially impacted accountability for other officers**,” Lippek continued, referring to an incident in which SPD Capt. Randall Woolery was [arrested](#) in an SPD sting operation and may have gotten [preferential treatment](#). “I hope that when you present the situation to the monitoring team and the court, you indicate that **the community has reported a need for investigation of police sexual abuse**.”

In Lippek’s original November email to Oftelie, she specifically asked Oftelie whether he would be willing to engage with her and her colleagues and “act as a point of entry for data to reach the DOJ and the judge.” She never asked the monitoring team to look at the data itself.

In this email, Lippek expressed a desire to “provide further detail about research; legal cases; OPA casefiles; and other evidence regarding potential sexual misconduct, abuse, and assault by SPD officers — particularly vice squad officers” and asked for Oftelie to tell her “the best way to engage with you as Monitor and provide information to the DOJ and the Court — can we provide documents to you via a secure filesharing method? Should we meet with you directly? Request to submit an amicus brief?”

As noted, Oftelie never replied to this email.

Furthermore, Lippek wrote in this November email in a section entitled “Ongoing Issues Preventing Community Engagement” that “[i]t was a grave disappointment, and one that has been maintained and repeated in the intervening decade, to find that the CPC did not make any serious effort to engage with significant populations that are impacted frequently by police contact — in particular, there has been almost zero attention to youth, let alone youth who are street-involved/homeless/drug-involved/practicing survival sex; or who have mental health diagnoses; or who are queer, trans, or gender non-conforming.

“We’ve been repeatedly told that the CPC is the only route for community concerns to reach the monitor, the judge, or any part of the consent decree management,” Lippek continued. “And the CPC has repeatedly demonstrated a fundamental unwillingness to hear from the most deeply-affected people in the city. That’s an impasse that has never been broken.”

Lippek also sent the *Emerald* the survey that the PHRA team distributed. That survey added questions to the original survey the CPC provided to survey administrators. The two surveys differ significantly, because the PHRA team included issues and communities that the CPC’s survey overlooked. The PHRA did not receive a grant to participate in the survey, as some other groups did, but they were allowed to participate, anyway, Lippek said.

While the CPC version is devoid of any specific questions regarding sexual harassment or abuse allegations, the PHRA team’s survey specifically asks several questions about this, including how often respondents believed SPD officers engaged in sexual abuse, inappropriate “searches” (alluding to invasive and inappropriate strip searches and cavity searches), and stalking and harassment. Lippek told the *Emerald* that the team specifically found responses regarding coercion, sexual harassment, and “bad” searches.

The CPC’s survey also does not have any questions about what the community felt SPD could do to engage in the process of reform, but the PHRA team’s survey does. Some of these suggestions included an elected public review board with the power to investigate police misconduct and fire bad officers, issuing defensive or nonlethal weapons only, and officers working in teams with counselors.

However, even though the PHRA team submitted this information to the CPC along with the original survey, the City, the CPC, or the outside organization that prepared the report based on the survey data appears to have disregarded the reported sexual abuse data. It is unclear who exactly disregarded it, particularly given that the CPC’s mission is to allegedly engage and bring community concerns about the police to the fore.

The *Emerald* has emailed Oftelie to ask why he never responded to Lippek’s November email and why he forwarded the information to the FBI, particularly since Lippek specifically asked him whether he would be an entry point to getting the data to the DOJ and the federal courts. It also asked him whether he talked with the CPC about the information Lippek forwarded him in November between that Nov. 28 email and before the CPC’s Community Engagement meeting on Feb. 8.

In the CPC’s Feb. 16 meeting, it appeared that the CPC was only just now being made aware of Lippek’s concerns, as CPC Commissioner Rev. Harriet Walden noted that the CPC was drafting a letter to Oftelie regarding something “disturbing,” though she did not elaborate further.

The *Emerald* reached out to both the CPC for clarity regarding all of this on Feb. 16, and will update this story if more information becomes available.

The FBI told the *Emerald* that it could not confirm or deny whether it had received any information from Oftelie.

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HEADLINE	02/18 Canada police arrests protesters in Ottawa
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/health/canadian-parliament-cancels-as-police-vow-to-end-protest/
GIST	<p>OTTAWA, Ontario (AP) — Authorities in Canada say they are beginning to arrest truckers who have paralyzed traffic in Ottawa for three weeks in a protest against the country’s COVID-19 restrictions.</p> <p>Police in Ottawa tweeted that some protesters are surrendering and being arrested Friday morning outside Parliament Hill.</p>

Police already arrested two of the protest's leaders late Thursday and have sealed off much of the downtown area to outsiders.

The capital represents the self-styled Freedom Convoy's last stronghold after weeks of demonstrations and blockades that shut down border crossings into the U.S. and caused economic harm to both countries.

Many of the truckers have vowed not to leave even if it means being jailed or losing their licenses under Canada's Emergencies Act.

THIS IS A BREAKING NEWS UPDATE. AP's earlier story follows below.

OTTAWA, Ontario (AP) — Canada's House of Commons canceled its work on Friday amid rapidly increasing signs police were about to begin breaking up the three-week protest by hundreds of truckers angry over the country's COVID-19 restrictions.

Ottawa police made it clear on Thursday they were preparing to end the siege near Parliament Hill and remove the more than 300 trucks. The city's interim police chief warned that "action is imminent."

Police arrested two protest leaders late Thursday.

House of Commons Speaker Anthony Rota warned lawmakers on Friday to "stay away from the downtown core until further notice" because of an expected police operation.

Lawmakers had been able to work uninterrupted for the last three weeks despite the protests outside by the self-styled Freedom Convoy.

The capital represented the movement's last stronghold after three weeks of demonstrations and blockades that shut down border crossings into the U.S and caused a political crisis for Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

The protests also have shaken Canada's reputation for civility and inspired similar convoys in France, New Zealand and the Netherlands.

Trudeau on Monday invoked Canada's Emergencies Act, empowering law enforcement authorities to declare the blockades illegal, tow away trucks, arrest the drivers, freeze their bank accounts and suspend their licenses.

The protesters around the country in trucks, tractors and motor homes initially focused on Canada's vaccine requirement for truckers entering the country. But the movement soon morphed into a broad attack on COVID-19 precautions and Trudeau's government.

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HEADLINE	02/18 Covid spread through patients in hospitals
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/as-omicron-surged-covid-19-spread-through-patients-in-hospitals-11645180201?mod=hp_lead_pos4
GIST	<p>As the Omicron variant surged through communities across the U.S., it also spread inside hospitals and infected non-Covid-19 patients, reaching a record number, a Wall Street Journal analysis of U.S. government data found.</p> <p>The daily total of patients with Covid-19 that they caught in hospitals reached a record of about 4,700 during the Omicron wave in January, according to the analysis of U.S. Department of Health and Human Services data.</p> <p>The figure had peaked at around 1,100 patients with hospital-acquired infections during the Delta wave and 2,050 at the height of the pandemic's first winter surge, the analysis found, among the first looks at</p>

how commonly the coronavirus spread inside the facilities during surges. The numbers dropped [as the surges retreated](#).

Hospitals have been going to great lengths to prevent [the spread of Covid-19 inside their walls](#). The findings show the challenges the facilities have faced in trying to protect vulnerable patients, despite taking precautionary measures during surges, and suggest hospitals must intensify those efforts during the waves, doctors and epidemiologists said.

The proportion of patients with hospital-acquired Covid-19 as a share of non-coronavirus patients has risen and fallen closely in line with Covid-19 cases in their surrounding communities, said Thomas Tsai, a Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health researcher who reviewed the Health department data and performed a statistical analysis that confirmed the Journal's findings.

Overall, the percentage of non-Covid-19 patients with infections they got inside hospitals doubles on days when Covid-19 surges hit their highs compared with days when cases drop to low points, he said.

"The hospital itself is not an island," Dr. Tsai said. During a surge, the chance that people with undetected infections will bring the virus inside hospitals hits a point that they become too great to keep in check, he said. "That's where the fire skips the fire line."

Viral transmission poses a substantial threat for hospitals. It can sicken [much-needed staff](#). It endangers [vulnerable patients](#) receiving critical care for cancer and other serious diseases.

If these patients develop Covid-19, they can require even more intensive treatment, adding to the strains on facilities that have struggled to cope with all their Covid-19 patients, especially during surges.

Given the stakes, hospitals say they have been taking precautions to avoid transmission of the coronavirus, including routinely testing patients, reconfiguring ventilation and screening visitors and staff.

Yet employees and visitors still can unwittingly bring the disease into hospitals. And surges often crowd hospitals, leaving less space to separate contagious patients from uninfected ones.

During the Omicron wave in January, New York hospitals reported a daily peak of 620 patients, or 2.2% of their total non-coronavirus caseload, who acquired Covid-19 during their stays.

"Hospitals have used aggressive infection-control practices throughout the pandemic, but when Covid-19 hospitalizations spike it challenges their ability to isolate infected patients," said Brian Conway, a spokesman for the Greater New York Hospital Association.

How many people have developed Covid-19 while in the hospital has been difficult to pin down since the federal Department of Health and Human Services stopped collecting and disclosing the numbers from hospitals in mid-2020.

Since then, the Health Department has published daily statewide totals for the number of patients without Covid-19 and the number who have infections they caught in hospitals. But not all hospitals report both sets of figures every day, making it difficult to calculate how much the virus is spreading inside hospitals.

The Journal sought to measure how commonly Covid-19 infections happen inside hospitals by analyzing unpublished data furnished by the Health Department.

The data provide a snapshot, by day, of the number of patients with Covid-19 they caught in the hospital, along with the number of non-Covid-19 patients in the facilities. The data are only for hospitals that have reported both sets of figures.

The data span from March 2020, when hospitals began reporting cases of in-hospital Covid-19 infections, to Jan. 31, 2022, a period including Omicron's sweep across the U.S.

The analysis likely undercounts the number of Covid-19 cases developed in hospitals, researchers said, partly because the facilities don't have to report patients who test positive after less than two weeks in the hospital or after discharge.

Early in the pandemic, hospitals said they struggled to prevent Covid-19 outbreaks because tests and protective gear were scarce. Doctors and researchers say the efforts picked up as critical supplies increased and more was learned about the virus.

Yet hospitals are still struggling to prevent outbreaks during surges. As Covid-19 cases surged during January's Omicron wave, states from New Hampshire to Washington hit new highs for infections occurring inside hospitals, according to the federal data.

Hospital-acquired Covid-19 cases accounted for as little as 0.1% of patients in hospitals daily who were admitted for something other than the virus during a lull last June, and as much as 1% during January's record high, the Journal's analysis found.

On Jan. 9, hospitals in the District of Columbia hit a record 76 patients, nearly 5% of their non-coronavirus patients, who had caught Covid-19 inside their walls. The next day, Maine hospitals had a record 25 patients, slightly more than 1% of their non-Covid-19 census, who were infected in the facilities.

To prevent outbreaks in its 10 hospitals, Northern Light Health in Maine has required masks, tested patients as they arrive and taken steps to ensure strong ventilation, said Suzanne Moreshead, associate vice president of infection prevention.

The system's hospitals also have infection-prevention staff who investigate reports of in-house exposure to try to halt transmission.

As cases climbed this winter, Northern Light's Eastern Maine Medical Center in Bangor took additional steps, including further restricting visitors. Yet the hospital was forced to close 16 general beds in January after an outbreak to prevent further spread, Ms. Moreshead said.

Infection-control experts who reviewed the federal data said hospitals will need to step up infection-control measures during Covid-19 surges to protect non-Covid-19 patients.

"You have to be a lot more careful about everything," said Aaron Richterman, an infectious-disease doctor and researcher at the University of Pennsylvania.

Among the extra measures are following a Covid-19 test for patients at admission with another test after a few days, in case they had undetectable cases earlier, said Meghan Baker, an infectious-disease specialist and hospital epidemiologist at Brigham and Women's Hospital. Patients should also wear masks, when they are able, she said.

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HEADLINE	02/17 Canada banks pressed to quell protests
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/canadas-banks-pressed-into-effort-to-quell-protests-11645146830?mod=hp_minor_pos10
GIST	<p>Canadian banks have begun cutting off financial services to people linked with ongoing anti-vaccine-mandate demonstrations in Canada, an unprecedented use of financial power following an emergency order from the government.</p> <p>With protesters occupying the streets of Canada's capital, Ottawa, and several border crossings blockaded until recently, the government has used emergency powers to put the nation's financial institutions in the unusual position of using their anti-money-laundering and sanctions expertise to crack down on banking customers.</p>

Financial institutions have “taken action” under an economic order that requires them to stop providing financial services to individuals and entities involved in disruptive protests and blockades, Canadian Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland said Thursday.

“That action is going to increase in the coming days,” Ms. Freeland said, warning [protesters who have complained](#) about vaccine mandates and social restrictions.

Under the emergency order, Canada’s banks have had to repurpose tools meant to stop foreign terrorism and drug trafficking against domestic demonstrators.

The emergency order calls a targeted account holder a “designated person,” mirroring language used in Canada’s sanctions law.

Ms. Freeland declined to say how many accounts linked to protesters had been affected, but she said safeguards were in place and that the government intends to “sunset” the measures as quickly as possible.

Banks aren’t welcoming their conscription into the unprecedented effort, said a person in the Canadian banking industry familiar with the matter, describing an early period of confusion about the order.

Law enforcement has since provided lists of names of targeted demonstrators to banks and expects financial institutions to flag transactions that seem aimed at demonstrators, the person said. The banks have turned their anti-money-laundering systems toward the task.

Apart from big banks, which are federally regulated, credit unions regulated by Canada’s provinces are also subject to the order, leaving protesters with few financial avenues that might evade scrutiny.

The issue of how to handle donations to the protests is perhaps the most thorny. Canadians and outsiders, particularly from the U.S., have given protest organizers millions of dollars in donations using GoFundMe Inc. and the Christian donation platform GiveSendGo LLC. Those platforms have been ordered to register with the Financial Transactions and Reports Analysis Centre of Canada, Canada’s financial-intelligence unit. Banks must also flag accounts linked to demonstrators to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and the Canadian Security and Intelligence Service, Canada’s spy agency.

Ms. Freeland declined to directly address whether donors would be targeted, but the person in the banking industry familiar with the matter said banks have been instructed to flag large donations that came in the wake of the announcement of emergency measures this week. Accounts involved in suspect transactions are expected to be frozen immediately, after which suspicions can be brought to law enforcement, the person said.

The order essentially requires the application of the pre-existing sanctions and suspicious activity rules to new targets, said Zain Rizvi, a lawyer at the firm Davies Ward Phillips & Vineberg LLP who advises financial institutions.

“It’s unusual, it’s something that’s never been done in history, but the actual requirements that they’re imposing on financial entities are not really new requirements,” Mr. Rizvi said.

The emergency order bars lawsuits against the banks, but the institutions face risks to their client relationships and reputations as they work to comply.

Canada’s Emergencies Act, passed in 1988, had never been invoked before, and its predecessor legislation was used only once in peacetime. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s father, Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, declared an emergency to allow law enforcement to round up individuals suspected of supporting French Canadian separatist militancy following the kidnapping of government officials in 1970.

	<p>U.S. law likely wouldn't allow the government to take similar steps to deal with an analogous domestic situation.</p> <p>Using sanctions law, the U.S. Treasury Department can mandate the freezing of accounts of designated individuals suspected of involvement in certain illegal activities such as terrorism and drug trafficking, but those activities must have a foreign tie, said David Stetson, a former senior lawyer at Treasury who now practices at the firm Steptoe & Johnson LLP.</p> <p>It would be "particularly unlikely in the U.S., and I might even say could offend the sensibilities of people who are accustomed to a system where the government has to be involved before citizens are deprived of access to their property," Mr. Stetson said. "It's unusual that Canada's framework doesn't seem to be recognizing some constraints."</p>
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HEADLINE	02/17 Disease experts warn caution, face threats
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2022/02/17/mask-mandates-opposition/
GIST	<p>The masks are coming off Thursday at Disneyland and Disney World. The theme parks are the latest places to say the pandemic has reached a point at which indoor masking is no longer required for people who are vaccinated — another sign the nation's health emergency isn't what it was in 2020, 2021 or even January 2022.</p> <p>Blue state governors are lifting mask mandates. So is Muriel E. Bowser (D), mayor of the nation's capital. And everyone saw what happened Sunday at the Super Bowl in the crowded, sort-of-outdoors environs of SoFi Stadium: Even though the Los Angeles County health department had said masks were required, just about the only people with their faces covered were the ones wearing helmets.</p> <p>But the easing of the coronavirus pandemic's grip is hardly a serene moment. The country is witnessing a broad backlash from many conservatives and libertarians, not only against the ongoing mask mandates but against the past two years of public health measures, including school closures, designed to suppress the spread of the virus. As the fall elections approach, the virus itself isn't the hot topic so much as the response to it.</p> <p>It turns out that winding down a pandemic response is in many ways much harder than launching a response when the virus is new, fresh and at its scariest. And in the pell-mell rush for the pandemic exits, even some people who were formerly supportive of public health measures designed to suppress the virus now don't want anyone standing in their way.</p> <p>"Public health is sort of the bearer of bad news. This is basically a kill-the-messenger phenomenon," said Yale University epidemiologist Gregg Gonsalves, who has been a vocal proponent of continuing measures to protect the most vulnerable communities.</p> <p>The virus is still killing people in startling numbers. Although infections are dropping fast, and hospitalizations too, deaths from covid-19 have not fallen at the same pace. The latest data show about 2,300 people every day, on average, dying of the disease.</p> <p>The current state of the pandemic has put Biden administration officials and many disease experts in an awkward position. They need to persuade people to stick with the program a bit longer, until the virus is brought under control. But they run the risk of losing their audience. Polling data show President Biden with drooping approval ratings for his handling of the pandemic.</p> <p>At a White House task force news briefing Wednesday, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Director Rochelle Walensky tried to assure the public that she and her colleagues understand the exhaustion with masking guidance and other pandemic restrictions. The problem is the data: By the CDC's count, 97 percent of U.S. counties still have "substantial" or "high" community transmission of the virus.</p>

As the case counts plummet, though, CDC guidance on masking and other issues will change in the coming weeks, she promised.

“We want to give people a break from things like mask-wearing when these metrics are better, and then have the ability to reach for them again should things worsen,” Walensky said. “We all share the same goal: to get to a point where covid-19 is no longer disrupting our daily lives, a time when it won’t be a constant crisis, rather something we can prevent, protect against and treat.”

Many disease experts feel passionately that now is not the time to let up on efforts to suppress the virus. But another faction of experts favors what Walensky suggested may be the next step forward — an easing of restrictions, coupled with a determination to restore them if the virus comes roaring back.

The broader public conversation is more tendentious. Opponents of public health measures have argued that anyone wanting restrictions at this point is a pandemic dead-end — someone who won’t let it go, and is clinging to the crisis.

Epidemiologist Mercedes Carnethon of Northwestern University went on national television programs recently to share her view that vulnerable populations still need protection and that people need to keep taking sensible measures to suppress the virus — such as wearing masks.

The hate mail hit her inbox immediately.

“Stop your idiotic blithering fear mongering already,” one correspondent wrote. Another implied Carnethon is a “big pharma prostitute” and lamented commentary from “know nothing clowns.”

“Civility is gone,” said Carnethon, a professor and vice chair of preventive medicine at Northwestern’s Feinberg School of Medicine. “I think it may be driven by fear — fear that we’ll never get out of this.”

Gonsalves said, “We need to stay vigilant and consider not just dialing down [precautions] but dialing up.”

Many people, he said, want to go back to how life was in 2019, but “wishing doesn’t make it so.”

Celine Gounder, an infectious-disease physician who advised Biden during the presidential transition and is now editor at large for public health at Kaiser Health News, said the backlash against people in her profession is demoralizing.

“I feel trust in public health is at an all-time low, and it’s being shredded even more in this moment. It’s in tatters at this moment,” she said. “Public health interventions don’t work without trust.”

That distrust is omnipresent in conservative news media, and on display in public hearings on Capitol Hill, where Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky.) has grilled the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, Anthony S. Fauci, as if Fauci had gone on a crime spree.

Biden may have been boosted in his 2020 campaign by arguing that President Donald Trump had done too little to halt the pandemic, but Republicans seeking office are generally making the opposite argument — that the government has done too much. “Faucism” is the preferred neologism to describe what are alleged to be excessive restrictions.

Backers of the more cautious approach are expressing themselves on social media, but they are not an organized bunch — they aren’t marching on the capital, as opponents of restrictions have, and they are not blocking the U.S.-Canadian border like the truckers in Canada. And there could be more protests ahead, as one group with more than 99,000 Facebook members is planning a trucker-led convoy across the United States in early March, with D.C. as the destination.

Biden's messaging in this recent phase has been muddled. In an interview, NBC's Lester Holt asked the president if he thought the blue state governors were acting prematurely in lifting mandates even as the CDC continues to recommend indoor masking.

"I've committed that I would follow the science. The science as put forward by the CDC, and the federal people, and I think it's probably premature, but it's, you know, it's a tough call," Biden answered.

The virus isn't static: The virus mutates, new variants appear. The omicron wave may be receding, but a new variant could roll up at any point from an unexpected branch of the virus's family tree.

Evolving, too, is the immunological landscape as people get vaccinated or recover from infections. Most people now have some immunity to the virus, but millions may have limited or even no immunity, even after vaccination, because they are immunocompromised or immunosuppressed. This population includes organ transplant and cancer patients, as well as people with autoimmune diseases requiring medication to tamp down their immune systems. Some people with severe health issues cannot get vaccinated at all.

This leads to public health judgment calls. The CDC when issuing guidance has generally erred on the side of caution, in part because it has been burned by premature moves such as last May's decision to lift indoor masking for vaccinated people — just as the delta variant was gaining traction.

Many Americans — including the ones emailing Carnethon — blame public health proponents for prolonging the crisis and preventing the return to normal. That leads to the next turn of the screw: If a lingering effect of the pandemic is that people view public health interventions as overreach, or somehow corrupted by factors other than saving lives, the country will be in worse shape the next time a virus comes roaring out of nowhere, sickening people en masse.

That's the conclusion of Andrew Noymer, a University of California at Irvine epidemiologist, who, when asked what the big lesson of the pandemic is, replied in an email that "public health as an intellectual endeavor is weak; its own subject-matter experts get swept aside in a crisis," and "we are less, not more, prepared for the next pandemic, after this."

Much of the rancor and unhappiness dates to early in the pandemic — the revolt against masking, led by red state Republican officials and libertarians generally — was well underway by summer 2020. But lately, some of the calls of no-more-restrictions are coming from inside the house: Many former supporters of pandemic interventions have moved to the other side, saying the lower caseloads and availability of vaccines and therapeutics mean it's time to fully reopen society — even if the CDC continues to endorse indoor masking in schools and in areas with substantial or high coronavirus transmission.

"Open Everything" declared an article in the Atlantic by Yascha Mounk, a former supporter of interventions. An organization called Urgency of Normal is pushing for an end to mask mandates in schools, saying in its mission statement that continued pandemic restrictions are now a greater threat to students than the virus: "Children — and their parents — have shouldered an outsize burden long enough. Restoring normal childhood is a moral imperative, based on the balance of today's evidence."

Some disease experts bristle at that argument, saying it reflects the views of healthy people in privileged strata of society. In more vulnerable areas, schools lack good ventilation, vaccine uptake is relatively low, and students are more likely to live in multigenerational families with elderly members who have a higher risk of severe disease from the virus.

Gonsalves expressed that in pungent terms in a long Twitter thread recently:

"This isn't my first time at the rodeo. With HIV, I saw how very privileged people were willing to f--- over others and let a virus flourish in the US and around the world, once they personally had access to potent antiretroviral drugs," he wrote.

	Gounder said she suspects some of the pushback against restrictions comes from vaccinated people who think they earned a return to normalcy: “I think people feel like, ‘I followed the rules, I should be able to get on with my life.’ ”
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HEADLINE	02/18 Ukraine Lviv becomes ‘western capital’
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/02/18/ukraine-russia-lviv-war/
GIST	<p>LVIV, Ukraine — There’s winding cobblestone streets and delicious pastries. The old Habsburg elegance still runs through Lviv.</p> <p>And it’s also about as far from Russia as you can get in Ukraine. These days, that makes it a preferred place for some to set up shop amid growing fears that Russia could attack — and possibly put the capital, Kyiv, in its crosshairs.</p> <p>At least five embassies, including the United States, have moved a part of their operations to Lviv, about 350 miles west of Kyiv and within a short drive to the Polish border.</p> <p>“I have ordered these measures for one reason — the safety of our staff,” Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in a statement Monday, explaining the move.</p> <p>Blinken also “strongly urged” any American citizens to leave Ukraine “immediately” — a message Washington has made a number of times. More than a dozen countries have told their citizens to leave Ukraine, including Britain and Australia.</p> <p>But Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky — who has blamed Western officials and media for sowing panic in Ukraine with predictions of a possible Russian invasion — criticized the diplomatic shifts to Lviv, calling them a “big mistake.”</p> <p>If an invasion takes place, “it will be everywhere” and not just in the eastern edges of the country, Zelensky said during a news briefing with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz in Kyiv on Monday. (Germany said it would keep its embassy open in Kyiv, but with reduced staff.)</p> <p>“You cannot be away from the escalation or problems in five, six hours,” he added, referring to the time needed to drive from Kyiv to Lviv.</p> <p>“It looks very strange,” Zelensky said. “But this is their choice.”</p> <p>On Tuesday, Kristina Kvien, the U.S. chargé d’affaires in Ukraine, was quoted by local media as saying: “I want to emphasize again that the move is temporary, and although we really like Lviv, we hope to return to Kyiv quickly.”</p> <p>Apart from diplomats, actual numbers of people moving to Lviv are hard to determine. No official figures have been published. Further complicating this picture is that many of those relocating are reluctant to publicize that they have fled Kyiv.</p> <p>Zhanna Shevchenko, a media consultant and reputation manager, said that she is helping about 20 friends find accommodations in Lviv. Among her extended group of acquaintances, she knows that many more have arrived or are planning to.</p> <p>Shevchenko said that many are afraid to make their move public, taking their cue from the government instructions not to raise the anxiety levels. The Zelensky government said the unease could assist Russia in what Ukrainian officials call Moscow’s “information war” against Ukraine.</p> <p>“People don’t want to have any panic,” she said. “But, at the same time, they are acting in case to avoid any danger.”</p>

For some of those who have relocated from Kyiv, the decision was sometimes made at a moment's notice.

Tymur Levchuk, who runs the LGBT activist group Fulcrum, said that he was visiting his grandmother in central Ukraine over the weekend when his husband called to say that he was being evacuated as part of his job at the Netherlands Embassy in Kyiv.

"It was a really spontaneous decision," Levchuk said. "On Sunday I discovered that I'm not returning to Kyiv and need to buy tickets directly to Lviv."

Now, the future is filled with uncertainty. "A lot of questions, but no answers," he said, referring to Russian President Vladimir Putin's next moves, and to the uncertainty of his own circumstances.

Lviv has already played host to Ukrainians in the past. It had an influx of refugees starting eight years ago, after Russia annexed Ukraine's Crimean peninsula and ignited a war in eastern Ukraine, which to date has killed nearly 14,000 people.

Lviv Mayor Andriy Sadovyi said that the city is ready for any scenario if Moscow chooses to escalate its conflict with Ukraine. Preparations extend to providing instruction to city employees in first aid and shooting practice with live rounds, he said.

Sadovyi said that he wants Kyiv to become "stronger and stronger" and for the embassies to return there as soon as possible.

But he added that there's a certain logic to Lviv — center of Ukrainian nationalism and culture, which dates its official founding to more than seven centuries ago — becoming something of a western capital for the country.

"Kyiv is the heart of Ukraine and Lviv is the soul," he said. "You can transplant a heart, but you can't transplant a soul."

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HEADLINE	02/17 Rare red weather warning for Ireland, UK
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/weather/2022/02/17/storm-eunice-red-warning-unitedkingdom/
GIST	<p>LONDON — As a rapidly intensifying storm approaches the United Kingdom and Ireland, rare red weather warnings have been hoisted for the southern part of the region, including London. Red weather warnings — the highest possible level — are for the threat of widespread damaging winds, with gusts over 90 mph expected in the hardest hit areas.</p> <p>Called Eunice, the storm is on track to strike southwest Ireland in the predawn hours Friday local time, before rapidly moving across the U.K. a few hours later, blasting cities like Cardiff and London with powerful winds. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson told reporters that the army was on standby to help people impacted by the storm. Hundreds of schools plus businesses across the country announced they would close.</p> <p>The red weather warning, initially issued for southwest England, southern Wales and southern Ireland, was expanded early Friday to cover southern and southeast England. It includes London, under such a warning for the first time, where the UK Met Office predicted winds could reach 60-70 mph, with localized gusts to 80 mph.</p> <p>The UK Met Office wrote that the storm would "bring significant impacts for many and represent a danger to life" in a news release.</p> <p>While severe winds and rain showers are anticipated in the southern parts of the British Isles, blizzard-like conditions are predicted on the storm's north side, particularly in the higher terrain of Scotland and Northern Ireland.</p>

Keith Leonard, director of emergency management at Ireland's Department of Housing, [called Eunice](#) a "high impact, multi-hazard" event. [Winds were already gusting](#) over 70 mph on Sherkin Island in far southwest Ireland as the storm rapidly approached predawn Friday.

Complicating matters, Eunice is the second of a one-two punch, as damaging [storm Dudley roared through the U.K.](#) and Central Europe on Wednesday, leaving significant damage and several dead. Worse is likely to come as Eunice eyes a Friday landfall.

"[#StormEunice](#) may be the sort of storm we only see a handful of times in our lives," [tweeted Holly Green](#), a meteorologist for British television network ITV.

After slamming Ireland and the British Isles on Friday with ferocious intensity, Eunice will then rapidly move into mainland Europe Friday night into Saturday. Northern parts of the Netherlands, northern Germany, Denmark and Sweden may be hard hit before the storm crosses the Baltic Sea and slams into eastern Europe.

Given its rapid speed, the worst of Eunice's impacts are likely to be wind-related, with widespread gusts up to 70 mph and gusts nearer 90 mph in the hardest-hit coastal areas. Zones of heavier precipitation are possible in northern Ireland and Great Britain, a portion of which will fall as moderate to heavy snow.

In addition to the rare red wind warnings, a widespread amber warning is in force for virtually all of England, Wales and Ireland for slightly lesser, though still strong winds.

In a [statement](#), U.K. Met Office Chief Meteorologist Frank Saunders noted that "the red warning area indicates a significant danger to life as extremely strong winds provide the potential for damage to structures and flying debris."

The timing of Eunice is particularly unfortunate, with the strongest winds occurring mainly during daylight hours for Ireland and much of England and Wales. Daytime storms typically maximize societal impact compared to a windstorm blowing over during the night.

In anticipation of severe winds, a number of attractions and businesses announced Friday closures, including the London Eye, a Ferris wheel on London's south bank, and Legoland, a theme park based in Windsor.

British Transport Secretary Grant Shapps warned of "service suspensions" across the rail network in the U.K. and urged people to "stay home" if they can. All of the train services across the nation of Wales were canceled for Friday, a decision that was "not taken lightly," said Bill Kelly of Network Rail Wales and Borders.

Airports also warned of the possibility of disruptions and delays.

Across the north, a significant snow warning is in effect for Scotland, parts of northern England and Northern Ireland on Eunice's edge. As much as six to 12 inches of snow may fall in parts of Northern Ireland and Scotland, with the highest totals in the hills and mountains. Although winds are not expected to be as strong in this region, the [snowfall is likely to lead to near-blizzard](#) conditions and treacherous travel.

Not your average windstorm

Meteorologists have been concerned by Storm Eunice all week. It was [named on Valentine's Day, Feb. 14](#), well before it even formed.

Winter storm naming in Europe is [done in cooperation with](#) Ireland's Met Eireann, the U.K. Met Office, and the Netherlands' meteorological service. The organizations state that naming helps increase awareness

of wintertime severe weather through an authoritative system. Names are given when a storm has potential to deliver red or amber warning weather to the region.

This storm was named with an unusual amount of lead time because of its potential severity; models have presented damaging and dangerous scenarios for days.

With the help of a powerful high-altitude jet stream, Eunice is expected to explosively intensify close to European shores, [perhaps becoming “bomb cyclone.”](#) or a storm whose pressure drops 24 millibars in 24 hours.

Storm Eunice will be at peak intensity as it moves through Northwest Europe, taking a particularly alarming track with damaging winds expected through many major towns and cities.

Historically, Europe experiences many wind storms each winter but the ferocious nature — winds of 70-plus mph, gusting to 90 mph — is extremely rare for some of the most densely populated areas of Europe. Eunice could be one of the most intense windstorms of the last 30 years in the region.

The high-impact nature of Storm Eunice is mostly down to where the storm forms. The Atlantic is like a cyclone factory with many intense windstorms forming every winter. The most intense phases of the storm development typically remain far from populated areas of Europe with the wildest winds often raging well out in the open Atlantic.

However, cold air that migrated out of the northeast United States and Canada early this week moved unusually far south and east across the North Atlantic. The strong clash of major cold near the Azores and profound warmth nearby in Southwest Europe gave birth to the perfect breeding ground for storm development, much further south and east than usual and in a densely populated region.

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HEADLINE	02/17 US surge vaccine support to Africa
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2022/02/17/us-global-vaccinations-surge-subsaharan-africa/
GIST	<p>The Biden administration will “surge” more than \$250 million in coronavirus vaccine assistance to 11 countries in sub-Saharan Africa, including several where the omicron variant was first identified, as it ramps up efforts to help vaccinate the world, according to a document obtained by The Washington Post and confirmed by global health officials.</p> <p>The Global VAX initiative, which the administration outlined in December, represents the latest effort to carry out President Biden’s vows to help end the pandemic and restore U.S. health leadership. Those goals are driven by national security and humanitarian concerns, as officials worry that a new variant could emerge in a largely unvaccinated country and quickly circle the globe. The fast-spreading omicron variant, which drove record levels of coronavirus cases and hospitalizations in January, was first detected in southern Africa in November.</p> <p>According to a Global VAX initiative “field guide” shared with diplomatic contacts, the United States will prioritize countries in sub-Saharan Africa — starting with Angola, Côte d’Ivoire, Eswatini, Ghana, Lesotho, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia — to “receive intensive support” for their vaccination campaigns through in-person staffing, technical assistance and more diplomatic engagement.</p> <p>Those countries have generally vaccinated fewer than 40 percent of their populations against coronavirus, according to the Our World in Data tracking project at the University of Oxford, but have reported upticks in recent weeks that U.S. officials say show the potential need for global aid.</p> <p>Under the Global VAX initiative, the U.S. plans to spend more than half of the \$510 million staked for the program to boost vaccination efforts in the 11 countries, which could include investments in mobile centers to administer shots, freezers for safe vaccine storage and other supplies, U.S. Agency for</p>

International Development officials told The Post. The initiative is focused on ensuring “shots in arms,” amid concern that many low-income countries lack the infrastructure to safely store and administer vaccine doses that have been donated by wealthier nations and global aid groups.

Meanwhile, the administration is eying a second group of nations — which includes Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo, Haiti, Kenya and Malawi — as possible future partners in the vaccine program but have yet to make significant commitments. “Those are places that we are assessing how best to support, and believe may have high potential in the medium to longer term,” Atul Gawande, assistant administrator for global health at USAID, said in an interview.

The administration also will continue with an array of smaller investments to support vaccinations, spreading the remaining Global VAX funds across dozens of countries, the officials said. “We’re really ramping up,” said Jeremy Konyndyk, executive director of the USAID covid task force. “What we found very consistently in our outreach is that countries do want doses, they do want to vaccinate, and when they have gotten the resources to do that, they’ve made good progress.”

While the United States has already shipped more than 420 million doses abroad, far more than any [other country](#), public health experts have warned that many donated doses are not being promptly administered because of fragile infrastructure, insufficient resources or vaccine hesitancy, problems that U.S. officials say can be largely addressed with targeted investments and diplomatic engagement.

The slow pace of global shots has also jeopardized the White House and the World Health Organization’s goal of vaccinating 70 percent of the world by midyear, Secretary of State Antony Blinken acknowledged on Monday. Fewer than 17 percent of Africans have received at least one shot of vaccine, according to the University of Oxford data.

The wide gap in access to vaccines has been a source of anger in the global south, with some public health leaders faulting [wealthier countries](#) for stockpiling extra doses and administering booster shots rather than sharing them with the developing world. South African President Cyril Ramaphosa said the gap in vaccine access amounted to “vaccine apartheid.”

USAID officials said in an interview that the 11 countries were prioritized because of the “high potential” that targeted support would lead to rapid gains, citing successful pilots in several of the countries. For instance, more than a quarter of the population in Ghana and Uganda has now received at least one shot of a coronavirus vaccine, after national vaccination rates hovered in the single digits for most of 2021, an uptick that officials said they are hoping to build on and replicate in other countries.

“What that tells us is when there’s the right mix of access to vaccines, access to resources, technical support, and the political will and leadership from the government, countries can make a lot of progress,” Konyndyk said.

Partner countries will be required to share more details and data with the administration on their national vaccination strategies, including quarterly progress reports. USAID officials are set to travel to Africa to support the vaccination initiative, which is being spearheaded by that agency, with Gawande heading to Nigeria next week. Administrator Samantha Power is planning a trip to sub-Saharan Africa, officials said.

“Creating Global VAX is about organizing the whole-of-government effort, not just in the 11 surge countries, but everywhere that we’re doing work,” Gawande said.

While some public health experts have questioned the need for a new vaccination program, USAID officials said the effort would build on global health work being done through other agencies such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention or initiatives such as the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, better known as PEPFAR, rather than duplicate them.

“You don’t want to pause the whole PEPFAR program or the whole malaria program to go do vaccinations,” Konyndyk said. “The more that we can spread this mission across a diversity of platforms, the more we also relieve some of the burden on them and enable them to continue their core work.”

USAID officials said they were able to fund the Global VAX initiative through the last remaining funds made available under the American Rescue Plan Act, a legislative stimulus package passed last year. Administration officials are weighing plans to request additional funding for global vaccinations from Congress, with some Democrats and global health experts calling for at least \$17 billion in [new money](#).

On Thursday, global health experts praised the administration for devising a “concrete plan” that resembled strategies used to successfully combat other global health challenges, such as HIV/AIDS, but called for expanding the program to more countries and securing additional funding.

“These are primarily the ‘low hanging fruit’ countries where progress is easiest to be made and measured. The last mile — or in this cases — miles, will be even tougher,” Jen Kates, who oversees global health policy at the Kaiser Family Foundation, wrote in an email.

“We need to grow both in terms of breadth as well as depth,” said Krishna Udayakumar, director of Duke University’s Global Health Innovation Center.

Udayakumar noted that USAID has now exhausted billions of dollars in funding from legislative rescue packages. “The second phase of this has to scale up pretty quickly,” he said. “That’s completely at risk now, unless there’s additional funding coming.”

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HEADLINE	02/17 Return of ‘revenge travel’ and big spending
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2022/02/17/travel-vacations-economy-omicron/
GIST	<p>Americans are preparing to spend big — again — as omicron cases subside and states across the country loosen covid restrictions.</p> <p>Travel agents, hotel operators and restaurateurs say they’ve seen dramatic spikes in demand in the past week, following a drop of more than 40 percent in daily U.S. coronavirus cases and spates of warmer weather in some parts of the country. People are booking spring break trips and summer vacations. They’re splurging on Disney vacations, private tours of Hawaii and cruises to Antarctica.</p> <p>Unlike earlier in the crisis, when it seemed the pandemic would end with a celebratory boom, the reality has been more uncertain and filled with fits and starts. Many say that’s given them a sense of urgency to lock in “revenge travel” during this window of relative calm before it possibly disappears again. And though the Food and Drug Administration has delayed a decision on a vaccine for children under 5, families are holding their breath and booking anyway.</p> <p>“People really want to make sure they travel while they can,” said Mark Matthews, marketing manager for Maui Seasons, a private tour company in Hawaii where bookings are up 65 percent so far this year. “Who knows when the next strain is going to come and what it’s going to look like? Everything is so unknown.”</p> <p>Pandemic patterns show that consumers rush out after each coronavirus wave, eager to splurge on flights, hotels, amusement parks and other services they had forgone.</p> <p>That surge in spending was most evident last summer, when households were emboldened by a lull in coronavirus infections and widespread vaccine availability. Subsequent rebounds have been less pronounced, though economists say they still provide a notable jolt to the economy.</p> <p>This time around, the expected burst of spending comes just as the Federal Reserve prepares to raise interest rates to slow inflation, fueled by consumer demand that is widely seen as unsustainable. Prices are</p>

rising at the fastest rate in 40 years, which Fed officials have said is the biggest threat to the economic expansion.

A new wave of spending could further complicate the Fed's plans while also raising broader questions about whether restaurants, hotels and airlines — which are already struggling to find enough workers — will be able to staff up in time to meet demand. Addressing worker shortages, leisure and hospitality employers raised wages an average 14 percent last year, making it the only sector where wage growth outpaced inflation.

Economists say it remains to be seen just how sustained or widespread a spring spending boom may be. Unlike in previous reopening surges, there are no government stimulus checks or extra child tax credit payments padding Americans' bank accounts. And while the economy continues to add jobs, wage growth has been largely eclipsed by inflation.

"I do expect things to bounce back, but in a broader context, spending has already been very strong," said Mark Zandi, chief economist at Moody's Analytics. "Omicron dented the economy but did less damage than previous waves."

Consumers spent heavily on furniture, cars and groceries in January, sending U.S. retail sales [soaring 3.8 percent](#) even as omicron roiled many parts of the economy. That's on top of record holiday sales, which jumped 14 percent to \$886.7 billion, according to the National Retail Federation. Now, as coronavirus cases subside, economists say Americans are likely to shift more of their spending from goods — such as electronics and exercise equipment — to services including travel and leisure.

To that end, airline bookings are rising. Hotels are filling up. And at Five Star Travel, demand for luxury cruises and European vacations has reached a fever pitch this week, according to Jay Shapiro, who owns the high-end travel agency with offices in Las Vegas, Honolulu and Fort Lauderdale, Fla.

"Clients who were sitting out the last few years — because they were old and had comorbidities — are calling now, saying 'We're ready to start cruising again,'" he said. "Business has picked up tremendously, just in the last day or two."

Customers are also spending considerably more after having been cooped up for the winter, Shapiro said. And for the wealthiest, couples who may have budgeted \$25,000 on a luxury vacation before the pandemic are suddenly willing to spend three or four times that, he said. A \$150,000 family vacation to South Africa is no longer out of the question for some. And many summer cruises to Europe are already sold out.

"People still have the means to spend; they just needed a catalyst, and now they have one," said Aneta Markowska, chief economist at Jefferies, who is planning a spring vacation, her first in two years, to Turks and Caicos. "They are sitting on the biggest cash cushion they've seen in years — and that's not just the wealthy; it's 80 percent of the population."

Americans have set aside roughly \$2.4 trillion in extra savings during the pandemic, in part because they've cut back on dining out, travel and entertainment, according to Wells Fargo. But data shows spending on those services tends to pick up rapidly as coronavirus cases subside.

Airline bookings for both domestic and international travel are on the upswing, according to Bank of America. Flight searches on the travel site Kayak have picked up in February, with interest in flights to the Philippines and Morocco [more than doubling](#) from a month ago.

Meanwhile, in Orlando, hotel bookings have almost fully returned to pre-pandemic norms in the past two weeks, according to the city's tourism association.

"This isn't our first rodeo. We know that the minute we get the opportunity, everybody rushes out," said Diane Swonk, chief economist at Grant Thornton. "We are going to see quite a strong catch-up in spending as we go into spring."

In North Carolina's Outer Banks, demand for beach home rentals is higher than it's ever been, according to Alexis Lowe, marketing specialist at Carolina Designs Realty, which manages about 350 coastal rental properties.

"We're so booked this summer that our focus is shifting to 2023," she said. "We filled our prime weeks faster than we ever have. I'm pleasantly surprised by how confident people feel."

That confidence, many in the industry say, has gotten a boost in the past week. With coronavirus cases on the decline, a number of states, including New York, Nevada, Rhode Island and Delaware, have dropped mask mandates, and many others have signaled that they will follow suit by the end of the month.

In Massachusetts, Gov. Charlie Baker (R) last week announced he would lift mask mandates at schools at the end of February, setting off a flurry of inquiries at the Vacationeer, a travel agency in Watertown, Mass., that specializes in Disney vacations. Owner Jonathan de Araujo says he already has twice as many trips on the books as he did in all of 2021, and expects that figure to triple by the end of the year.

"People are back at it," he said. "With all of these states dropping mask requirements, it was like a signal that things are getting back to normal. Families are saying, 'We haven't traveled in two years. Let's do it now.'"

But, he says, he's also prepared for another round of closures and cancellations if coronavirus cases pick back up again. "There could be another spike and my customers could say, 'I'm not traveling right now,'" he said. "If I've learned anything, it's that things change."

After canceling a long-awaited European vacation in March 2020, Jenni Solis finally booked another trip — albeit on a smaller scale. She's planning to fly to Redwood National Park for five days in June.

"Omicron is getting better and I really need to get away," said Solis, 47, an elementary school teacher in Los Angeles. "We need to unwind even more than we did pre-pandemic."

But, she added, she's still not ready to rebook her vacation to Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands just yet, in case it's derailed by a new variant. "I don't want to cancel a trip like that again," she said.

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HEADLINE	02/18 Studies: Africa hit harder by Covid
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/02/18/africa-covid-cases-number-study/
GIST	<p>It's one of the enduring mysteries of covid-19: Why didn't the pandemic hit low-income African nations as hard as wealthy countries in North America and Europe?</p> <p>There is no simple answer to that question. But this week, two new studies added to our understanding of it. One suggested that the number of covid-19 cases may be vastly undercounted across the continent; another found good evidence that the number of deaths in at least one country could be significantly undercounted.</p> <p>Neither study necessarily changes our current big picture understanding of the pandemic — that wealthy countries often saw worse outcomes than developing nations.</p> <p>However, they could have a big impact on the debate about how and why African nations were forgotten by wealthy nations during the pandemic — especially as the European Union and the African Union meet in a joint summit in Brussels and the World Health Organization pushes for wealthy nations to back a South African facility that aims to share mRNA technology.</p> <p>"In Africa, 83 percent of people still have not received a single dose," WHO Director General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said Tuesday at a Vaccine Equity for Africa event in Germany. "This is not only a</p>

moral failure, it is also an epidemiological failure, which is creating the ideal conditions for new variants to emerge.”

The coronavirus ravaged almost all corners of the earth, including wealthy nations like the United States and Britain. In Africa, things went differently. The continent “appears to have bucked the doomsday predictions of global health experts,” my colleagues [wrote in December 2020](#).

Even after the fast-spreading omicron variant, first identified in southern Africa late last year, that trend has largely held up. One-fifth of the world’s population lives in Africa, but the continent has accounted for only a tiny sliver of confirmed cases around the world.

According to [Our World in Data](#), as of mid-February, 2.7 percent of all confirmed covid-19 cases were found on the continent. By comparison, North America saw 22 percent of all global cases; Europe more than a third.

But reliable public tracking of new daily covid-19 cases rests on something important: easy access to coronavirus tests and the expensive infrastructure to administer and track their results. Throughout the pandemic, many African nations had neither.

In a [preprint study](#) released this week, a team of researchers with WHO backing tried to tackle that problem by looking at available data about people with covid-19 antibodies across the continent. These studies, known as seroprevalence surveys, use bloodwork to show who has some level of immunity to the coronavirus — whether through vaccinations or a previous infection.

The study found that levels of immunity in Africa appeared to be vastly higher than could be explained by official case numbers, even when combined with the continent’s paltry vaccination levels. Every nation surveyed had far higher levels of immunity than official figures showed; Nigeria had a ratio of 958 to 1.

By September 2021, over 65 percent of the continent had some form of immunity to covid-19, the study estimated. This, the authors write, suggests there had not been 8.2 million cases across the continent by that time — but 800 million.

If this was accurate, did no one notice? One possibility, raised by the WHO-backed study, is that many of the cases in Africa may have been asymptomatic — perhaps more than two-thirds. Compared with Europe and North America, most African countries have relatively young populations that are less likely to see serious illness from the coronavirus.

The comparatively low number of deaths recorded from covid-19 across the continent seems to support this idea. Just 4 percent of deaths globally were recorded in Africa, according [to Our World in Data](#).

There are many signs that not all deaths from covid-19 are caught in official figures. Even in the United States, [the number of “excess deaths” recorded](#) by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that are not directly attributed to covid-19 is roughly 100,000.

Most African nations do not collect the data needed to estimate excess mortality. But a small and innovative study released [by the World Bank](#) this week used an unusual method to estimate pandemic deaths in Kenya: a popular obituary website.

By looking back at several years on the website — which was used because better data did not exist — the researchers were able to see how past trends compared to the pandemic years. Their conclusion was that since the start of the pandemic, there have been roughly 28,000 “excess deaths” during the pandemic period, compared with just 5,520 recorded in official government figures.

Neither study provides anything like a full accounting of covid-19 in Africa. Instead, they add to a better understanding of the many gaps in knowledge about covid-19 that remain two years into the pandemic.

	<p>If we take the idea that both cases and deaths in Africa were significantly undercounted, it has some surprising knock-on impacts. In some cases, it may mean that demand for coronavirus vaccines across Africa could be lower. A number of groups, including the WHO's Africa branch, have already suggested that the worst is over for the continent. Any plan for manufacturing on the continent will have to deal with this factor, as a recent analysis by the Center for Global Development argued.</p> <p>More broadly, it refutes the idea that covid-19 was simply a disease for rich countries. As other studies have shown, there was a range of experiences among wealthy nations. And when excess deaths are evaluated on a global scale, the vast majority of them may have been in the developing world. Africa wasn't miraculously spared from the pandemic, and there's little reason to think it could not be hit far harder next time.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/17 Southern Calif. faces steep hike fire danger
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/weather/2022/02/17/california-southern-fire-study/
GIST	<p>Days when large damaging wildfires are possible could nearly double in Southern California by the end of the century if climate change continues unchecked, according to a study released Thursday in the journal Communications Earth & Environment.</p> <p>The study projects an overall lengthening of the fire season, with more large fires during historically cooler and wetter months in late fall and early spring. That's particularly problematic in autumn, when Santa Ana winds strengthen and vegetation tends to be driest before the winter rainy season arrives.</p> <p>For a scenario of high greenhouse gas emissions, the region could see 71 high-risk fire days per year by 2100, compared to the 36 it averaged during the 1970-1999 period, which the study uses as a historical baseline.</p> <p>By 2100, Southern California is projected to be nearly 9 degrees warmer than it was near the end of the 20th century for an emissions scenario known as "RCP 8.5," which assumes a heavy use of coal in the coming decades. With coal use declining in many countries, a number of climate scientists say this scenario has become less probable.</p> <p>But even under a more moderate emissions scenario, the region warms by 5 degrees, and high-risk fire days increase to 58.</p> <p>Fast-spreading wildfires become more likely as temperatures rise because a warmer atmosphere can draw more moisture from plants and soils, as measured by a metric called the vapor pressure deficit.</p> <p>"As temperatures go up and humidity goes down, there's a deficit of water vapor in the air," said Glen MacDonald, a professor of geography at the University of California at Los Angeles and a co-author of the study. "That has been shown by other studies to really be tied into the potential for large fires — it helps promote drying of the fuels."</p> <p>Previous research found that climate change is the main driver behind a sharp rise in vapor pressure deficit in the Western United States over the last several decades.</p> <p>With vegetation reaching tinder-dry levels more often during the year, fires ignite easily and burn more intensely.</p> <p>"We're predicting how many days are going to be ripe for large fire — that's kind of like loading the dice," MacDonald said. "There are going to be more of those days when, if you get that ignition and it's windy, that fire is going to take off."</p> <p>Over the last several decades, Northern California has seen a clear upswing in burned area as temperatures rise, but the same trend hasn't yet been observed in Southern California, perhaps because the region lacks</p>

the dense forests of the northern half of the state and is heavily populated — cut-through with freeways and housing developments.

It has, however, experienced devastating wildfires in recent years, including the [Thomas Fire in December 2017](#) and the [Woolsey Fire in November 2018](#) — both late-season fires fueled by Santa Ana winds after unusually warm and dry spells.

Mitigating fossil fuel emissions will be key to avoiding an increasingly fiery and destructive future, because the risk diverges considerably after mid-century between the high and lower emissions scenarios.

Chunyu Dong, the study's lead author and an associate professor at the Center for Water Resources at Sun Yat-sen University in China, wrote in an email that the authors used an improved and more refined modeling technique to simulate the future changes in daily large fire occurrence and in the length of the large fire season, and that after about 2050 "the destructive power of the high emissions [scenario] will be progressively released."

This winter, California has seen a spike in wildfire activity after nearly six weeks without significant rain, a record-breaking February heat wave and repeated dry winds.

On Wednesday, the Airport Fire ignited near Bishop, Calif. in the Owens Valley and quickly grew to [2,800 acres by Thursday](#), driven by fierce winds.

MacDonald, the study co-author, directs the nearby [White Mountain Research Center](#), where staff had to be evacuated as firefighters worked to contain the blaze.

"This is a story that's happening in real time as we speak here," he said. "This is the climate trajectory."

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HEADLINE	02/17 Police mobilize: imminent crackdown
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/17/world/canada/canada-protest-police-crackdown.html
GIST	<p>OTTAWA — After weeks of protests that have paralyzed parts of Canada and seized global attention, police forces mobilized on Thursday in and around Ottawa, scene of the last major blockade, warning that a crackdown was "imminent" and threatening demonstrators with an array of legal penalties.</p> <p>Tension built throughout the day as the authorities issued a stream of warnings, saying that once they move in to clear the streets of the capital city, the protesters face arrest, seizure of their vehicles, loss of any pets in their trucks and cars, revocation of their drivers' licenses, fines — and up to five years in prison if they bring children to an unlawful demonstration.</p> <p>"We've been bolstering our resources, developing clear plans and preparing to take action. The action is imminent," Ottawa's interim police chief, Steve Bell, said in an afternoon news conference. He said the police had created a perimeter with about 100 checkpoints to keep any newcomers from joining the protests in the downtown area around Parliament Hill.</p> <p>After declaring the downtown a secure zone closed to outsiders, police officials also closed all exits leading to the city center on the Trans-Canada Highway, which is Ottawa's crosstown expressway. By Thursday evening, there was widespread gridlock through several neighborhoods in the inner parts of the city.</p> <p>On Parliament Hill, the sleeting rain that had drenched Ottawa much of the day turned to snow, and defiant protesters remained in the streets, some of them dancing. One group of demonstrators followed a news camera crew, yelling, "Are you proud of what you're doing?"</p> <p>Just after 8 p.m., a yellow Volvo semi truck voluntarily departed from Confederation Square — which surrounds the National War Memorial — after the police approached the driver. As the trucker opened his</p>

door for the last time before leaving, protesters shouted messages of gratitude to him while scolding the police.

The demonstrators said they had received text message alerts with the location of the police who were confronting the driver to try to intercede. It was the second truck in the area to leave Thursday.

On Wellington Street, one of the streets heavily occupied by trucks, few police officers were visible, despite the repeated warnings from officials during the day.

The protests, organized by members of far-right groups, initially seized on opposition to a mandate that truck drivers be vaccinated against Covid-19 if they cross the border from the United States, and arranged convoys that blockaded border crossings, highways and some city streets. But the largely peaceful civil disobedience grew into a small but potent outlet for broader frustration and anger at pandemic restrictions in general and the government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

Organizers made appeals on Wednesday for more truck drivers and supporters to flood Ottawa, making the blockade there too large for the police to disperse. But the number of protesters' vehicles on the streets there dwindled in recent days — though it remained in the hundreds — as it became evident that official patience was wearing thin.

The weather forecast called for heavy snow overnight and temperatures well below freezing on Friday — conditions that could greatly complicate the movement of heavy trucks. The dire police warnings and deteriorating conditions fueled expectations on the street that the police would move in on Thursday night or early Friday, though how much resistance they would meet was unclear.

As the convoy protests appeared to be nearing an end, at least temporarily, it remained to be seen what lasting effect they might have on the usually restrained arena of Canadian politics.

After Mr. Trudeau's declaration on Monday of a national state emergency under the Emergencies Act gave the police greater powers, law enforcement officials clearly hoped that days of escalating warnings would scatter protesters without the use of force — particularly truckers who would face financial ruin with the loss of their expensive vehicles and drivers' licenses, as well as time in prison.

But many protesters remained defiant. Surrounded by five of his eight children, Daryl Sheppard, a teacher from North Bay, Ontario, 220 miles northwest of Ottawa, walked through the protest on Thursday holding an anti-vaccination sign. Mr. Sheppard, 41, said he and his children would remain in Ottawa, no matter what the police ordered.

"I'm not really concerned with laws that infringe on my rights as a citizen, my right to bear witness," he said — a view echoed in some form by many of his comrades.

Protesters say organizers have instructed them that if the police come to uproot them, they should lock themselves in their vehicles and refuse to cooperate. But those who blockaded border crossings largely dispersed when the police moved in, and there were few arrests.

Officials — and many ordinary Canadians — have insisted that it is the protesters who are infringing on the rights of others, impeding commerce and clogging streets. The border blockades forced some automakers' plants to halt or slow production, sending workers home.

"We're not using the Emergencies Act to call in the military," Mr. Trudeau said in Parliament on Thursday. "We're not limiting people's freedom of expression. We're not limiting freedom of peaceful assembly."

But, he added, "the blockades and occupations are illegal" and are threatening the economy "and the availability of essential goods like food and medicine."

	<p>On Thursday, lawyers for a group of Ottawa residents expanded on a lawsuit they filed, seeking hundreds of millions of dollars in damages from the protesters, the organizers and those who have given them financial support.</p> <p>Along with the checkpoints in Ottawa, the police erected barriers around the Parliament building. On the city's outskirts, officers gathered in large numbers at various spots, including a number of hotels. In addition to the Ottawa police, the mobilization included the Ontario Provincial Police and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the national force, though it was not clear how many officers had mustered for a push to clear out the demonstrators.</p> <p>Mr. Trudeau and other officials have been criticized for not acting faster and more forcefully against the protests, but Canadian government and law enforcement have long espoused a patient approach to peaceful protest. The prime minister notes frequently that he has no direct control over law enforcement, and his emergency declaration was the first such move by a government in more than 50 years.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/17 US: 'very high' chance of invasion soon
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/feb/17/very-high-chance-invasion-soon-biden-says/
GIST	<p>President Biden and his top aides unleashed a new volley of warnings Thursday that the Kremlin is preparing for a military invasion of neighboring Ukraine, perhaps in the next few days, as the administration brushed aside Russian protestations to the contrary.</p> <p>The extraordinarily blunt comments from Mr. Biden, Secretary of State Antony Blinken and other senior U.S. officials set off more fears of a shooting war in the heart of Europe, sent U.S. stocks plunging in value, and seemed to leave only a small and shrinking window for a diplomatic way out of the conflict.</p> <p>U.S. and NATO officials again said they saw no signs on the ground of a promised Russian pullback of some of the more than 130,000 troops that have methodically surrounded Ukraine on three sides in recent weeks.</p> <p>Mr. Biden told reporters at the White House on Thursday morning that the invasion threat remains "very high" because Russia has moved more troops toward the border with Ukraine instead of pulling them back.</p> <p>"Every indication we have is they're prepared to go into Ukraine, attack Ukraine ...," Mr. Biden said. "My sense is it will happen in the next several days."</p> <p>"The evidence on the ground is that Russia is moving toward an imminent invasion. This is a crucial moment," said Linda Thomas-Greenfield, U.S. ambassador to the United Nations.</p> <p>Instead of pulling back its troops, ships and heavy weaponry ringing Ukraine, the Russian military has dispatched another 7,000 soldiers to the tense border area in recent days, U.S. officials say. The Ukrainian government and Russian-backed separatist forces traded charges of shelling in the Donbass area.</p> <p>Mr. Blinken and British Prime Minister Boris Johnson warned that the Kremlin was poised to use that conflict as a "false-flag operation" as a pretext for an invasion.</p> <p>As Russian officials decried what they called "war hysteria" from Washington, Mr. Blinken used a hastily scheduled address to the U.N. Security Council on Thursday morning to lay out what he said was the likely way Moscow would use disinformation and other tricks to justify military action. He said the administration felt compelled to speak out on the dangers, even at the risk of being proved wrong.</p> <p>"Let me be clear: I am here today not to start a war, but to prevent one," Mr. Blinken told the Security Council. "The information I've presented here is validated by what we've seen unfolding in plain sight before our eyes for months."</p>

“If Russia doesn’t invade Ukraine, then we will be relieved that Russia changed course and proved our predictions wrong. ... And we will gladly accept any criticism that anyone directs at us.”

Mr. Blinken warned that Russia had multiple ways to fabricate an excuse for military action, including “the invented discovery of the mass grave, a staged drone strike against civilians or a fake — even a real — attack using chemical weapons.”

Mr. Blinken and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin will huddle with their European allies and with Ukrainian officials over the next few days at the annual Munich Security Conference in Germany. Vice President Kamala Harris is leading the U.S. delegation to the gathering, which Russian officials are boycotting this year.

It will be one of the most delicate and high-profile assignments yet for Ms. Harris, who had relatively little foreign policy experience when Mr. Biden chose her as his running mate in 2020. She is scheduled to meet with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

“The key objective for her trip now is to focus on this fast-changing, evolving situation — this tremendous challenge that we are facing now — to make sure that we are fully aligned with our allies and partners, and to make sure that we have sent a very clear message to Russia,” a senior administration official said. “Our preference is diplomacy and deterrence, but if Russia chooses aggression, we are ready. The U.S. is ready; our allies are ready.”

Russian response

In Moscow, the government of Russian President Vladimir Putin released a lengthy written response to U.S. and NATO proposals to end the crisis. It said the Western response effectively ignored Russia’s national security red lines. The U.S. and its allies have rejected the Kremlin’s demands to bar Ukraine permanently from NATO and to pull back troops and weaponry broadly along Russia’s western borders.

The document defends Russia’s massive buildup of troops on Ukraine’s border.

“Ultimate demands to withdraw troops from certain areas on Russian territory, accompanied by threats of tougher sanctions, are unacceptable and undermine the prospects for reaching real agreements,” the 10-page response read.

“In the absence of the readiness of the American side to agree on firm, legally binding guarantees to ensure our security from the United States and its allies, Russia will be forced to respond, including through the implementation of military-technical measures.”

Mr. Blinken said in his U.N. remarks that he had written a letter to Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov asking for another face-to-face meeting in Europe next week.

Analysts say the Biden administration has made a clear decision to effectively release all of its intelligence findings — confirmed and speculative — into the public debate in an effort to put the Kremlin on the defensive and preempt possible strategies to shift the blame for the crisis to Ukraine and NATO.

Mr. Austin, appearing with NATO’s Mr. Stoltenberg, offered some of the signs pointing to a Russian incursion, including the troop and naval buildup, the presence of more combat and support aircraft, and even the stocking-up of blood supplies near the front lines with Ukraine.

“You know, I was a soldier myself not that long ago,” said Mr. Austin, a former Army general, “and I know firsthand that you don’t do these sorts of things for no reason. And you certainly don’t do them if you’re getting ready to pack up and go home.”

The strategy comes with some risks, as Mr. Blinken acknowledged. Russian officials have mocked repeated American predictions of “imminent” war, and even Mr. Zelenskyy has criticized the scare talk coming from Washington. He said it is undermining the confidence of ordinary Ukrainians.

China, which has moved closer to Mr. Putin as the clash with the U.S. has escalated, criticized the Biden administration for “hyping and sensationalizing the crisis.”

“Disseminating disinformation and creating an air of tension is not conducive to resolving the Ukraine issue,” Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin told a Beijing briefing. “Clamoring for bloc confrontation and wielding the big stick of sanctions will only impede dialogue and negotiation.”

Another front in the U.S.-Russia stare-down opened Thursday when the Russian Foreign Ministry announced that it had ordered the deputy chief of mission for the U.S. Embassy in Moscow to leave the country.

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said in a statement Thursday afternoon that the expulsion of veteran diplomat Bart Gorman last week was retaliation for a demand that an unidentified Russian diplomat leave Washington, and was not an escalation in the clash over Ukraine. The U.S. expulsion, she said, left the Russian Embassy severely understaffed.

“This was done strictly in retaliation for the groundless expulsion of a minister-counselor of our embassy in Washington, contrary to his senior diplomatic rank,” Ms. Zakharova said in the statement, posted on the ministry’s website. “Moreover, the [State Department] defiantly ignored our request for prolonging his stay at least until a substitute arrived.”

A State Department official called the move “unprovoked.”

“We consider this an escalatory step and are considering our response,” a department spokesperson said.

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HEADLINE	02/17 GAO: DOD ill-prepared for war w/China
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/feb/17/defense-department-ill-prepared-china-war-gao-says/
GIST	<p>Beijing’s expanding military poses a “significant threat” to the United States and the Pentagon is not ready for a conflict with China, according to a new report by the Government Accountability Office.</p> <p>“Today, China has transformed what was an obsolete military into one that can challenge the U.S. military across the spectrum of conventional and unconventional capabilities,” the GAO said in a report made public this week.</p> <p>Key weaknesses identified by the congressional watchdog agency include military readiness shortfalls, force mobility problems and supply chain issues needed for new F-35 warplanes.</p> <p>“Potential adversaries, including China, now contest all domains,” the GAO survey found. “From fiscal years 2017 through 2019, U.S. military readiness increased in the ground domain and declined in the sea domain, while readiness ratings in the space, air and cyber domains were mixed.”</p> <p>Other problems identified by GAO include vulnerabilities in weapons systems that can be exploited by Chinese cyberattacks, Navy crew fatigue and attack submarine operating problems.</p> <p>The Defense Department “has struggled to ensure its weapon systems can withstand cyberattacks and should take steps to incorporate cybersecurity requirements into contracts,” the report said.</p> <p>China’s growing arsenal of space weapons — missiles, robot satellites, lasers and cyber capabilities — also could cripple U.S. military operations in a future conflict.</p>

“China is developing capabilities that threaten [the Defense Department’s] satellite communications systems,” the report said, adding that Beijing is building arms for large-scale anti-satellite strikes using novel physical, cyber and electronic warfare means.

The Pentagon has analyzed ways to replace existing vulnerable space systems but “concluded that it needs more information to select the next satellite communications architecture,” the report said.

A sailor shortage

The GAO said the Navy suffers from a shortage of manpower.

“Crew shortfalls contribute to sailor fatigue and safety issues, including two fatal Navy ship collisions in the Pacific Ocean in 2017,” the report said. “With Navy ships under-crewed by 15% on average in 2020, the Navy will be challenged to fully crew the fleet needed to counter advanced adversaries.”

The Navy also was faulted for not having robust capabilities for repairing ships during wartime. The service is in the early stages of figuring out how to repair ships damaged in a major conflict.

“Without designated leadership, the Navy may be hindered in its efforts to address sustainment challenges,” the GAO said.

Any conflict with China would involve large-scale attacks on Navy ships from the People’s Liberation Army’s large arsenal of anti-ship missiles.

China has deployed several types of ballistic missiles capable of targeting moving ships at sea, including DF-26 missiles that the GAO says can reach target ships 932 miles from Chinese coasts.

The Navy’s asymmetric warfare advantage of having a powerful attack submarine fleet also has been hampered by readiness issues. The report said the Navy lost over 10,000 operating days for attack submarines from 2008 through 2018. During the delays “these key assets provided no operational capability,” the GAO said.

The Chinese military is also working on advanced artificial intelligence systems for warfare.

“China views artificial intelligence (AI) as critical to its future military and industrial power and is pursuing plans to be the global leader in AI by 2030,” the report.

Challenges for China

Despite the findings, the report noted that China is also facing challenges, including its own military weaknesses.

The Defense Intelligence Agency has stated that China, while a large developing nation, “still faces multiple complex security challenges including several regional territorial disputes,” the report said.

China’s decades-long military buildup of both conventional and nuclear forces has not achieved Beijing’s goal of creating a world-class armed forces by 2049. According to the report, the Pentagon “risks not achieving the new strategy’s goals because it has not taken key actions — such as identifying processes and procedures to integrate [electromagnetic spectrum] operations across the department, reforming governance structures, and clearly assigning leadership for strategy implementation.”

Regarding electronic warfare that is likely to be a major feature of a potential U.S.-China war, the GAO said the Pentagon needs better oversight over electronic warfare operations to ensure the superiority of China and control the battlefield.

	<p>Electronic warfare involves offensive and defensive measures to disrupt enemy weapons and communications and protect U.S. systems.</p> <p>GAO said in an earlier report that despite strategy reports produced in 2013, 2017 and 2020, the Pentagon has failed to assign senior leaders with authority and resources to implement effective strategies.</p> <p>The GAO identified five “threat vectors” from China, including anti-access, area-denial capabilities, naval warfare capabilities, cyber threats, space weapons and military artificial intelligence technology. The report made no mention of the threat posed by China’s virus laboratory research, a leading theory behind the cause of the COVID-19 pandemic in December 2019.</p> <p>The report concluded that China’s growing economic, diplomatic, military and technological power and a willingness to employ those powers pose a significant long-term threat.</p> <p>The Pentagon needs to better prepare for competition and combat with China by increasing combat capabilities and enhancing conventional deterrence of a conflict.</p> <p>“Going forward, key policy considerations include ensuring that the Defense Department is prepared to maintain supply chains, gather intelligence, and responsibly leverage emerging space, cyber, and AI technologies in response to potential threats,” the report said.</p> <p>A Pentagon spokesman did not immediately respond to an email request for comment.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/17 OD deaths rise among Blacks, Indigenous
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/feb/17/black-native-americans-fentanyl-deaths-rise-opioid-crisis
GIST	<p>As the drug overdose crisis in the United States exploded during the coronavirus pandemic – killing an unprecedented 100,000 people in 12 months – Black and Indigenous Americans were increasingly likely to become the victims.</p> <p>Drug overdose rates in America surged by 31% in 2020, according to figures from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), as the pandemic left many facing lockdowns, and economic and emotional strain. But researchers at the University of California Los Angeles have found that the death rate surged most dramatically among Black and Indigenous Americans, who saw a staggering increase of 49% and 43% respectively in just one year.</p> <p>While the data is not broken down by drug type, experts point toward one driving force: the explosion of synthetic opioids such as fentanyl, a highly potent drug that has flooded the US market and often ends up mixed into street drugs such as heroin, methamphetamines or cocaine.</p> <p>Researchers say the numbers highlight the shifting dynamics of who is most at risk from the opioid crisis, which has in recent decades been viewed as an epidemic of rural, white America. Between 2019 and 2020, the overdose death rate for Black and Indigenous Americans surpassed that of white Americans, who were already dying in unprecedented numbers.</p> <p>“We’re at a historically tragic moment,” said UCLA addiction researcher Joseph Friedman, who co-authored the study. “The increasing toxicity of the drug supply has disproportionately affected communities of color.”</p> <p>The tragedy has hit home for the Black community with several recent high-profile deaths, including the actor Michael K Williams and comedian Fuquan Johnson. Williams was found dead in his Brooklyn home in September from a mix of heroin, cocaine and fentanyl. Four men have since been charged in his death.</p> <p>Johnson, 42, died at a Venice Beach house party after reportedly ingesting cocaine contaminated by fentanyl.</p>

“He loved life and he was just starting to make his mark,” Pauline Johnson, Fuquan’s mother, told the Guardian, adding that her son would not have taken the drug if he knew it contained a dangerous synthetic.

Friedman and the study’s co-author Dr Helena Hansen, a UCLA psychiatrist and anthropologist, warn in their report that drug overdoses are “increasingly becoming a racial justice issue”, one that has been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic but stems from historic inequities, including high rates of incarceration, economic disenfranchisement and loss of community cohesion.

Others point to a “perfect storm” created by a wave of super-potent synthetic drugs hitting the streets at a time users were feeling increased isolation and displacement because of the pandemic. These problems may have had bigger impacts in communities of color, which saw some of the worst health consequences from the coronavirus while shouldering some of the largest economic burdens.

Overall, however, there are still “a lot of unknowns” about what exactly has driven the sudden rise, or whether it will continue, says Ricky Bluthenthal, an addiction researcher at University of Southern California who was not involved in the study. Part of the problem is that the pandemic has limited hands-on research, says Bluthenthal, who usually collects information from drug users in Los Angeles and San Francisco, but was unable to get out into the field in 2020.

But Bluthenthal does point to the rise of fentanyl as a key element of the crisis. “What’s happening is fentanyl is replacing heroin in most of the nation’s largest drug markets,” said Bluthenthal. “As fentanyl has begun to replace heroin and become the only thing available, you have this increased mortality among African Americans.”

Changing the narrative

The [UCLA study](#), which has not yet been published in a peer-reviewed journal, analysed the most recent data from CDC on overdose trends. While the number of overdose deaths rose for all racial groups nationally between 2019 and 2020, the rate increased fastest for African Americans, the study found, growing by 49% compared with a growth of 26% for white people. Overall death rates were highest for Indigenous Americans – who lost 41.4 people per 100,000 in the population in 2020, an increase of 43% over 2019.

Nationally, death rates for Hispanics were less than those of whites and Asian American deaths but were not assessed by the UCLA study.

The 2020 national numbers represent a huge shift from a decade earlier when white Americans were twice as likely to die of drug overdoses. It also complicates a narrative that has often painted the last two decades of opioid deaths as a crisis of white despair. In 2010, at a time when doctors were flooding lower-income, white communities with prescription opioid pills, white Americans were twice as likely to die of overdoses as Black Americans, according to the study’s authors. Then the US cracked down on opioid prescribing practices, forcing many who were dependent on opioids to turn to street drugs such as heroin.

This created larger markets around the country for illegal heroin, which was soon being adulterated and then replaced altogether by the cheaper-to-make and easier-to-transport synthetic drugs such as fentanyl, said Hansen.

“It began in the north-east, but it’s now spanned into the west,” she explained. “The overdose death rates for all racial groups rose dramatically, but in 2020 Indigenous American and Black death rates crossed over to exceed white death rates.”

Hansen and other drug addiction researchers who spoke with the Guardian challenged the narrative that drug overdoses are a white crisis – saying the discussion has become overly focused on “deaths of despair”, a theory that blames the increase in drug overdose in the early 2000s on the growing job losses and disenfranchisement in predominantly white, more rural areas.

Hansen said this construct dismisses waves of overdoses in Black and brown communities that began decades earlier, when heroin was marketed toward economically disadvantaged communities starting in 1960s and continuing through the crack epidemic of the 1980s, which led to the “war on drugs” and mass incarceration.

“When Black people died it was normalized,” said Hansen, who is working on a book on this topic. She believes that people who are economically disenfranchised are those most vulnerable to drug overdoses, no matter their race. “However, when it comes to poor Black and brown neighborhoods, this happened decades earlier and we didn’t call that ‘deaths of despair’,” she said. “We called that ‘crime’.”

‘Symptoms of continuing legacy of oppression’

The crisis facing Indigenous Americans has also been overlooked and misunderstood, said Melissa Walls, an indigenous addiction expert who is the director of the Great Lakes Hub for the Johns Hopkins Center for American Indian Health in Duluth Minnesota.

Pharmaceutical companies agreed to [a \\$590m settlement](#) with Indigenous American tribes this month, over claims that the companies’ targeted sales of opioid pills, such as Oxycontin, fueled waves of addiction and overdose deaths that have hit Indigenous communities particularly hard.

The data shows Indigenous Americans have had overdose death rates competing with those of whites since the rise of prescription opioids in the early 2000s – and have a 2020 rate well above those of other racial groups at 41 deaths per 100,000 people.

But Walls said the roots of the crisis among tribal groups goes back much further to first contacts with Europeans that began the displacement of Indigenous people from their tribal lands, and left many Indigenous Americans disenfranchised.

“This is just the teeny-tiny top of the iceberg of a lot of historical trauma and structural racism that goes back to how this country was founded and how Indigenous people have been treated since colonizers arrived,” Walls said. “These are just symptoms of a much bigger historical legacy of oppression that continues today.”

Yet she worries that focus on the addiction problems further pathologizes Indigenous communities, when instead the emphasis should be on supporting tribes to rebuild their cultures.

“These issues veil the reality of strength and brilliance in the indigenous communities,” said Walls, who has worked on creating programs to address addiction problems by using traditional Indigenous American healing methods. “Every single native community I have worked with shares one common answer to these issues and that is reclaiming our culture. Returning to our cultural teachings is going to be the ticket out of this mess.”

Friedman said that recent incarceration is also a huge risk factor for overdoses – and one that disproportionately affects Black and Indigenous Americans “due to the over-policing and over-incarceration of Black and Indigenous communities”. Those who have just been released from jail are more prone to overdoses because their tolerance for drugs is low, while a lack of treatment services and social support increases the risk of relapsing.

The fact that rising overdoses come amid a pandemic that has already disproportionately affected communities of color makes the study even more troubling, said Dr Daniel Ciccarone, a professor specializing in addiction medicine at the University of California San Francisco.

“This is very unfortunate data,” said Ciccarone. “The historic magnitude of the drug crisis is tearing the fabric of our society,” he said. “It’s time for fundamental policy changes in how we treat and prevent drug use.”

HEADLINE	02/17 ITAC warned Canada: extremist groups
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/17/ottawa-protests-anti-terror-agency-warned-violent-extremists
GIST	<p>Days before the so-called Freedom Convoy reached Ottawa, starting a weeks-long occupation of Canada's capital and triggering a string of copy-cat blockades, the federal government was warned that violent extremist groups were deeply involved in the protest movement.</p> <p>Intelligence assessments – prepared by Canada's Integrated Terrorism Assessment Centre (Itac) and seen by the Guardian – warned in late January that it was “likely” that extremists were involved and said that the scale of the protests could yet pose a “trigger point and opportunity for potential lone actor attackers to conduct a terrorism attack”.</p> <p>The assessments offer the first real glimpse into how federal law enforcement and intelligence agencies have assessed the threat of Canada's anti-vaccine and conspiracy theory movement.</p> <p>“We knew these people were coming,” said a federal government source, who indicated that the Security Intelligence Service Canada – Canada's main intelligence service, of which Itac is a part – had flagged the involvement of extremist groups and individuals in official briefings.</p> <p>The intelligence reports also show that clear warnings were sent to Ottawa police ahead of the convoy's arrival in the capital. The city's police has become the focus of a fierce debate over whether they should have done more to prepare for, or prevent, the occupation.</p> <p>Itac reported that supporters of the convoy have “advocated civil war”, called for violence against prime minister Justin Trudeau, and said the protest should be “used as Canada's ‘January 6’”, in a reference to the storming of the US Capitol.</p> <p>An early report, dated 27 January, Itac concluded that “a coordinated, complex terrorist attack or planned storming Parliament or other federal locations is unlikely”.</p> <p>But it concludes that the potential for violence remained very real.</p> <p>“While the organizers have declared that this is an act of peaceful protest, some ideologically motivated violent extremism followers in Canada have seized upon this rally to advocate for their own ideological objectives,” the January document reads. “Extremists and other individuals supporting Covid-19 conspiracy theories and violent anti-authority/anti-government views have expressed intent to participate in the convoy and to attend the accompanying protest in Ottawa.”</p> <p>The assessment warns that protesters, and possible extremists, “could use rudimentary capabilities, such as trucks, cargo and fuel, to cause disruptions to infrastructure”.</p> <p>Presciently, the report warned that the 31 January return of Parliament “could motivate a dedicated group of protesters to prolong their protest in Ottawa”.</p> <p>Included in the report is a meme, which was shared widely in the early days of the convoy, which shows a map with a circle surrounding Ottawa and reads “permanent gridlock zone until freedom restored”.</p> <p>As the occupation dragged into its second week, Itac issued another report on 8 February.</p> <p>“All events remained relatively peaceful, with limited low-level conflict,” it reads. “However, violent online rhetoric and the physical presence of ideological extremists at some gatherings remain a factor of concern.”</p> <p>The report makes particular mention of the QAnon figure Romana Didulo, the self-styled “Queen of Canada”, who has instructed her followers to kill healthcare workers and politicians. She and some of her followers appeared in Ottawa for the occupation, waving flags representing her supposed kingdom.</p>

Itac also drew attention to a constellation of other demonstrations across the country, including in Quebec City where “the QAnon flag was observed, and the extremist group La Meute stated that approximately 100 members participated in the protest.” [La Meute](#), or The Pack is one of the most visible and influential far-right, anti-Islam organizations in Quebec. It also claimed to have sent supporters to the Ottawa protests, the report said.

In the second report, Itac continued to assess the likelihood of a January 6-style insurrection as unlikely, but began warning that “the most likely ideologically motivated violent extremism-related scenario involves an individual or small group using readily available weapons and resources such as knives, firearms, homemade explosives and vehicles in public areas against soft targets, including opposition groups or members of the general public.”

Earlier this week at a blockade at the Coutts border crossing in Alberta, police arrested four men and charged them with conspiring to kill police officers and civilians.

On Wednesday, the public safety minister, Marco Medicino [confirmed that some of those arrested had ties to some extremist elements in Ottawa](#). Some of the men arrested are believed to belong to a loose-knit group known as Diagon.

Itac reports are largely based on open source intelligence, meaning information already available in the public domain, and law enforcement sources – the centre does not actively monitor individuals or conduct its own investigations.

The purpose of Itac is to provide various levels of local law enforcement with reliable information on emerging threats, said Stephanie Carvin, a former intelligence analyst with the Canadian Security Intelligence Service who now teaches at the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs at Carleton University in Ottawa.

“They seem to recognize the nature of the event, and who’s coming to the event,” she said. But, the analysts appear to have missed some of the extreme elements of the leadership of the convoy, Carvin said. “It was a movement led by extremists to begin with, and we should not be surprised they turned to extremist tactics.”

Itac’s warning that only a dogmatic few would brave the Ottawa cold for parliament’s return on 31 January proved to be a significant underestimation. Yet, even that warning wasn’t heeded. The deputy chief of the Ottawa police service said in early February that they planned for “a potentially weekend-long demonstration”, and were caught off guard when the convoy parked in front of Parliament.

“Was the problem that he didn’t have the information?” Carvin said. “Or was the problem that they just don’t take white supremacy seriously?”

Carvin said intelligence agencies had been briefing the Canadian government as far back as late December on the possible threat posed by the convoy.

“[The protest leaders] were exceptionally clear on what they wanted to do, and how they were going to go about doing it,” she said.

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HEADLINE	02/17 Hospitals resume non-urgent surgeries
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3353958/washington-hospitals-resume-non-urgent-surgeries/
GIST	<p>Hospitals across Washington state can resume all procedures, surgeries, and operations starting Thursday, Feb. 17.</p> <p>Non-urgent and elective medical procedures were put on hold more than a month ago to ease the strain on medical providers as cases of COVID-19 surged, primarily due to the omicron variant.</p>

	<p>Snohomish County Executive Dave Somers said the pause made a difference in his region.</p> <p>“Our hospitals did get right on the edge of becoming overwhelmed, but the death rate was not as high as previous waves,” he said. “We avoided the really serious situation of health care services [being] totally overwhelmed — very close, but we got through it OK.”</p> <p>The head of the Washington State Hospital Association, Cassie Sauer, says there is now a backlog of people waiting for surgery. She also clarified that any medical centers that were not overloaded were able to perform less urgent procedures during the pause. In all cases, doctors had discretion to decide which operations and treatments could not be delayed.</p> <p>Last week, when Gov. Inslee made the announcement that surgeries could resume Feb. 17, he also said he would be telling the National Guard to “stand down” soon as cases and hospitalizations are declining.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/17 Canada police arrest key convoy organizer
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/17/world/canada-ottawa-protests-news#ontario-provincial-police-mobilize-in-possible-preparation-to-disperse-protesters
GIST	<p>The police have begun moving in to make some arrests in downtown Ottawa, hoping to end weeks of gridlock in Canada’s capital from demonstrations sparked by vaccination requirements and other grievances.</p> <p>Among those arrested Thursday night was Tamara Lich, 47, one of the protests’ main organizers, according to Dagny Pawlak, a spokeswoman for the protest.</p> <p>Ms. Pawlak called the arrest “absolutely baseless and a disgrace to any liberal democracy, although not a surprise.”</p> <p>Ms. Lich has emerged as the public face and the most visible leader of the trucker convoy against pandemic restrictions. She is a former fitness instructor, who has worked in the energy sector and sung and played guitar in a band called “Blind Monday” in Medicine Hat, Alberta. She was also a senior member of a splinter party that advocated for Canada’s Western provinces to secede from the country.</p> <p>Throughout the protests, Ms. Lich, who speaks publicly in measured tones, has become adept at deploying social media — and her Twitter feed — to amplify the protesters’ grievances.</p> <p>The police also arrested another organizer, Chris Barber, on Thursday afternoon, a spokesman for the protest confirmed.</p> <p>Officials had been signaling for days that what had been criticized as a sluggish law enforcement response would soon be ending, and on Thursday, city, provincial and national police mobilized around Ottawa in preparation for a clampdown. Officers were seen gathering at a convention center near the airport and at major hotels on the city’s perimeter.</p> <p>“The action is imminent,” Steve Bell, interim chief of the Ottawa Police Service, said Thursday afternoon, adding that the police were committed to ending the “unlawful occupation.”</p> <p>The police created a perimeter with about 100 checkpoints in Ottawa’s downtown core on Thursday, to keep anyone but residents from entering, and declared the downtown a secure zone closed to outsiders.</p> <p>Officials also closed all exits leading to the city center on the Trans-Canada Highway, which is Ottawa’s crosstown expressway. By Thursday evening, there was widespread gridlock through several neighborhoods in the inner parts of the city.</p>

On Parliament Hill, the sleeting rain that had drenched Ottawa much of the day turned to snow, and defiant protesters remained in the streets, some of them dancing. One group of demonstrators followed a news camera crew, yelling, “Are you proud of what you’re doing?”

Just after 8 p.m., a yellow Volvo semi-truck voluntarily departed from Confederation Square — which surrounds the National War Memorial — after the police approached the driver. As the trucker opened his door for the last time before leaving, protesters shouted messages of gratitude to him while scolding the police.

The demonstrators said they had received text message alerts with the location of the police who were confronting the driver to try to intercede. It was the second truck in the area to leave Thursday.

The police issued increasingly urgent warnings on Wednesday and through the day Thursday — posted online, on social media and in printed leaflets distributed by hand to the protesters — stating that the blockade of streets was illegal. They threatened the protesters with arrest, seizure of their vehicles and other penalties.

In a sign of intensifying frustration over the protests, on Thursday the scope of a class-action lawsuit against the protesters was expanded to include more workers and businesses whose livelihoods have been upended by the protests. In total, the lawsuit is seeking about 306 million Canadian dollars in compensation for lost income.

In recent weeks, truckers and their supporters blocked key border crossings and other routes, impeding commerce and idling automakers’ plants. Some blockaded streets and harassed residents in Ottawa, creating a round-the-clock cacophony in quiet residential neighborhoods. While many of the demonstrators are from fringe groups, others are people who are fed up with pandemic restrictions. Physical violence has been rare.

Ottawa residents and many Canadians have grown impatient with the sluggishness of the police response, and early this week Ottawa’s police chief resigned amid criticism of law enforcement.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau took the rare step this week of declaring a national public order emergency — the first such declaration in half a century — to end the protests. The move extended more robust policing measures across the country, and took aim at both protesters’ fund-raising, which has been deemed a criminal activity, and the demonstrators’ personal and business bank accounts.

Addressing the House of Commons on Thursday, Mr. Trudeau called for the protesters to go home. “It is high time that these illegal and dangerous activities stop, including here in Ottawa,” he said.

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HEADLINE	02/17 Police: kids at protest, parents face jail time
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/17/world/canada-ottawa-protests-news#the-police-warn-that-people-could-face-prison-for-taking-children-to-protests-but-some-parents-are-defiant
GIST	<p>Children scamper gleefully outside in the cold among the growling trucks occupying Parliament Hill, playing street hockey and jumping on bouncy castles inflated for their entertainment.</p> <p>Some are the sons and daughters of the truckers who have been camped here for nearly three weeks. Others have been brought by their parents in a show of support for the convoy.</p> <p>On Wednesday, Ottawa police officers went truck to truck handing out a notice telling demonstrators they were breaking the law and faced arrest. It warned that anyone taking a minor to an unlawful protest could be fined up to 5,000 Canadian dollars “and/or potentially spend up to five years in prison.”</p> <p>Outside Parliament with his son and two daughters on Thursday, wearing “Make America Great Again” baseball caps, Baret McAuley, a retired oil field company manager, said the notice did not change his</p>

plans to protest with his children, Emily, 17, and Ryan and Sarah, both 12. They had driven more than 1,700 miles from Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, a 30-hour trip.

“I don’t believe that any person with a soul will take away my children,” said Mr. McAuley, 47.

A woman, who requested anonymity because she feared the consequences of violating the police order, said she arrived at the protest that morning with her young child, only to learn en route about the possible risk. They stood waiting on the street for a ride back home, she said, unwilling to take any chances.

Irwin Elman, who formerly served as Ontario’s child and youth advocate, sharply criticized protesting parents who planned to remain there with children. “To stay there and not exercise a parent’s duty of care to their children, and put their own rights ahead of the rights of their children, it’s unforgivable and selfish,” he said.

Last week, police said children were present in about 25 percent of the heavy trucks at the protest. As the police appeared to be bracing on Thursday to remove the protesters, there were fewer minors among the trucks.

Interim Ottawa police chief Steve Bell said in a statement Wednesday that police will be working with the Children’s Aid Society and have “a plan” to keep young people safe in the event of their caregivers’ arrest. He did not elaborate.

In a statement, the Children’s Aid Society of Ottawa on Wednesday urged parents to make child care arrangements should they be arrested. If children and parents are separated due to law enforcement action, the organization said, it will “work to reunite families as soon as possible.”

Surrounded by five of his eight children, Daryl Sheppard, a teacher from North Bay, Ontario, 220 miles northwest of Ottawa, walked through the protest on Thursday holding an anti-vaccination sign. Mr. Sheppard, 41, said he and his children would remain in Ottawa, in defiance of the emergency orders.

“I’m not really concerned with laws that infringe on my rights as a citizen, my right to bear witness,” he said.

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HEADLINE	02/17 Fringe protest gains attention and anxiety
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/17/world/canada-ottawa-protests-news#ottawa-protests-media-attention
GIST	<p>There are plenty of coronavirus deniers and conspiracy theorists marching among the trucks in downtown Ottawa, but Mike Johnson doesn’t count himself among them.</p> <p>Mr. Johnson, 53, said he wasn’t even particularly concerned about government mandates or vaccine passports until his son urged him to drive to the nation’s capital to protest against them a few weeks ago.</p> <p>But now his fire engine red truck, the only thing of significant value he owns, is parked right outside Canada’s Parliament — and Mr. Johnson says he’s prepared for the police to seize it and to forsake his livelihood to defend the cause.</p> <p>“When we turned our headlights toward Ottawa, I don’t think any of us knew what we were driving into,” said Mr. Johnson, a trucker from Niagara, Ontario. “I didn’t realize how bad it was until I got here.”</p> <p>Many among the protesters have links to far-right parties whose support is so low that they hold no seats in the federal Parliament. Mr. Johnson said that he supports one such party, the People’s Party of Canada, whose leader has railed against multiculturalism, immigration and climate change “hysteria.”</p>

What began as a loose group of protesters against vaccine mandates has transformed into a wider movement against pandemic restrictions in general and the premiership of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. The logjam in the nation's capital, the weekslong blockade of an Ontario bridge that is vital to automakers' supply chains, and the media projection of all that onto the global stage have given the protests an outsized megaphone and impact.

As the police appear poised to clamp down on the protests, the so-called "Freedom Convoy" will likely live on long after the last trucks depart — if only as a vivid template of how civil disobedience can be effective, in particular in a liberal democracy where the threshold for law enforcement intervening to stop demonstrations can be high.

Much like Occupy Wall Street in 2011, the Canada convoys show that what seem like fringe political movements can gather force at a time of anxiety — and when the world's cameras are pointed at them. Back then, the driving force was anger over endemic social inequality. These days it is a lethal global pandemic.

Mr. Johnson never got vaccinated and didn't have to — hauling scrap metal around northern Ontario doesn't require border crossing. He believes the coronavirus is real and when people knock on the door of his cab to talk about conspiracy theories he refuses to engage.

"That's not why I'm here," he said. "It's a distraction."

His centrally located truck has become a kind of command station for anyone who needs a break from the bitter cold or a place to charge a phone. The throngs of people who stop by have moved Mr. Johnson with stories of losing their work because they don't want to get vaccinated.

Mr. Johnson believes that even if the police arrive in force, the truckers will have made a lasting mark on the country by drawing attention to their demands.

"This has already been a positive accomplishment," he said, eyeing the police car parked on the lawn of the Parliament building. "Regardless of what happens."

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HEADLINE	02/17 Canadians question police soft-touch
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/17/world/canada-ottawa-protests-news#police-enforcement-truckers-indigenous
GIST	<p>Police in Ottawa are poised for a crackdown on the protests that have immobilized Canada's capital, but after three weeks of scant enforcement, images of police officers fraternizing with protesters have some Canadians questioning the gentle treatment of the demonstrations.</p> <p>In particular, many people on social media are contrasting the police conduct at the trucker protests with the displays of force seen at other recent demonstrations, particularly by Indigenous people.</p> <p>A video on social media, filmed by a protester from the passenger side of a vehicle on Feb. 12, showed an Ontario Provincial Police officer telling a man and woman through an open window that he supported their cause. The provincial police force has launched an internal conduct investigation into the officer, a spokesman confirmed to The Times.</p> <p>At the border blockade in Coutts, Alberta, where police seized a cache of weapons and made 13 arrests on Monday, a video circulated online showing Royal Canadian Mounted Police officers hugging and shaking hands with protesters as they dispersed.</p> <p>"That was astonishing to me. I can't think of an equivalent situation where the police would have been as supportive of the protesters, particularly in the context," said Lesley Wood, an associate professor at York University, in Toronto, who studies social movements in policing.</p>

While she said that the latest pandemic protests were not equivalent in composition and tactics to Indigenous land defense or Black Lives Matter protests, differences in race, political orientation and trust in law enforcement could affect how the police perceive a crowd.

Groups like racial or ethnic minorities that have historical reasons to distrust the police are more likely to be seen by officers as uncooperative or threatening, and are much more likely to be met with a militarized, aggressive response, Professor Wood said. Groups, like the current protesters, that include large numbers of former police officers and military service members are more likely to receive friendly treatment.

Many Canadians have contrasted the treatment of the demonstrations to the heavy-handed response last year to [protests to protect old growth forests](#) in and around Fairy Creek on Vancouver Island, British Columbia. Royal Canadian Mounted Police officers were filmed tearing off protesters' Covid masks before [dousing them with pepper spray](#).

The differences are real, but the Canadian police have generally been slow to escalate in response to civil disobedience by any group, said Howard Ramos, a political sociologist at the University of Western Ontario.

The protests at Fairy Creek, for example, lasted about a year before police ratcheted up enforcement. And he noted that after the Wet'suwet'en First Nation [blocked pipeline workers from entering disputed land](#), the police did not mobilize to make arrests for almost two years after obtaining an injunction, [according to the R.C.M.P.](#)

"But at the same time, there are clear instances where the level of sympathy that's being shown to some of the protesters has been uncharacteristic, to say the least," Professor Ramos said.

Neil Boyd, a criminology professor at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia, cautioned against viewing Canadian police as a monolith, but said some of the police behavior at the protests sends a negative message to the public.

"This may not be an insurrection," he said, "but it's certainly an assault on the rule of law and an assault on democratic tradition."

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HEADLINE	02/17 NM drops indoor mask rule immediately
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/17/world/covid-19-tests-cases-vaccine#new-mexico-will-end-its-indoor-mask-mandate-effective-immediately
GIST	<p>Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham of New Mexico said on Thursday that the state would lift its indoor mask mandate, including for schools, effective immediately.</p> <p>The announcement came as a surprise during a news conference to discuss the end of the state's legislative session.</p> <p>The Democratic governor is up for re-election in November, and had been faced with increasing pressure to reverse the requirement as states like California and New York eased restrictions.</p> <p>New Mexico, until today, was one of the last remaining states that had yet to set a date for lifting the mandate, but fell in line with the quick succession of states governed by Democrats that have reversed their masking requirements in recent days.</p> <p>Masks must still be worn in settings like hospitals, long-term care facilities and detention facilities. But the decision on masking in schools will be left for local school administrators to decide.</p>

	<p>“We’re grateful to our school superintendents and charter leaders who are at the front lines of keeping students and staff safe” Kurt Steinhaus, the public education secretary, said in a statement. “It’s important to us that the decision on masking is made at the school level.”</p> <p>The mask mandate, which applied regardless of vaccination status, had been reinstated last August as the state’s vaccination rates remained stagnant despite rising case numbers. Ms. Lujan Grisham had also announced in August that teachers and all workers at public, private and charter schools in the state would have to be vaccinated or face regular testing.</p> <p>On Thursday, the governor’s office said that over 85 percent of New Mexicans are vaccinated against with coronavirus with at least one dose and that the number of hospitalized residents dropped by well over a quarter since the end of January.</p> <p>After the announcement, most of the governor’s cabinet members took off their masks.</p> <p>Ms. Lujan Grisham pointed to declining rates of hospitalizations as an indicator to reach the decision, and noted the success of the previously instated vaccine mandates. “Having the vaccine mandates work,” she said. “That’s putting us in a position to lift the mask mandate.”</p>
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HEADLINE	02/17 CDC: NYC convention not superspreader
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/17/world/covid-19-tests-cases-vaccine#nyc-anime-convention-2021-superspreader-event
GIST	<p>After the first person known to have become infected with the Omicron variant in the United States was revealed to have attended a 53,000-person anime convention in Manhattan, concerns quickly mounted that the event had sown the seeds of a major coronavirus outbreak.</p> <p>But a new study released on Thursday by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention suggested that a combination of good air filtration, widespread vaccination and indoor masking had in fact helped prevent the anime convention in November from becoming a superspreader event.</p> <p>The share of attendee tests that came back positive was similar to the share of coronavirus tests that were positive across New York City around the same time, the C.D.C. said. What’s more, the few positive samples that were genetically sequenced were largely of the Delta variant, not Omicron.</p> <p>And conventiongoers who became infected were more likely than those who tested negative to have gone to bars, nightclubs or karaoke clubs.</p> <p>Still, the C.D.C. said that the virus’s spread at the convention could have been much worse had it been held after Omicron became dominant in the city, given that the variant is so contagious and capable of spreading among the vaccinated. At the anime convention, the C.D.C. said in a separate report on Thursday, the only documented Omicron infections were in a single cluster of at least 16 positive cases.</p> <p>The first study relied largely on people who came forward for testing after the event, which introduced potential biases: Those people could have been more cautious than the average convention attendee, or more inclined to report cautious behaviors. Health officials had urged attendees to get tested. The C.D.C. could only look for cases among people on a registration list of ticket buyers, which did not account for the full number of attendees.</p> <p>The agency’s findings matched those of New York City contact tracing officials, who said in early December that they had not found signs of widespread transmission at the anime convention.</p> <p>In the aftermath of the event, held at the sprawling Javits Center, the convention organizers came under scrutiny as people reported seeing attendees flouting masking rules and pushing past checkpoints.</p>

	<p>But among attendees who were tested, the C.D.C. said, “evidence of widespread transmission during the event was not identified.”</p> <p>The study drew on test results identified through health department surveillance systems for 4,560 attendees. Of those, 119 people — 2.6 percent — tested positive. Researchers also sent online surveys to attendees asking about their test results, symptoms and activities during the convention.</p> <p>The anime convention required attendees to have received at least one vaccine dose. The C.D.C. said that among attendees who could be matched with test and vaccination data in health department surveillance systems, 85 percent had completed their primary vaccination series, another 12 percent had received a booster dose and 3 percent were partly vaccinated.</p> <p>The C.D.C. study also credited the convention hall for being outfitted with HEPA filters, which have been shown to efficiently remove coronavirus particles from the air.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/17 WHO: omicron subvariant spreading
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/17/world/covid-19-tests-cases-vaccine#global-cases-are-dropping-but-an-omicron-subvariant-is-spreading-the-who-says
GIST	<p>The Omicron surge seems to be slowing in much of the world, but a subvariant that scientists believe is even more contagious is on the rise, and a decline in testing has muddled the global picture, the World Health Organization said.</p> <p>New cases worldwide dropped 19 percent from Feb. 7 to Feb. 13, compared with the week before, according to the agency.</p> <p>The W.H.O. also said that the subvariant of Omicron, BA.2 appeared to be “steadily increasing” in prevalence and that BA.2 had now become dominant in several Asian countries, including China, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and the Philippines. Denmark was the first nation to report that BA.2 had overtaken BA.1, the version of Omicron that first swept through the world.</p> <p>Scientists have said there is no evidence that BA.2 is more lethal than BA.1, though BA.2 could slow Omicron’s decline. Vaccines appear to be just as effective against BA.2 as they are against other forms of Omicron.</p> <p>BA.2 now accounts for roughly one in five new Omicron cases recorded across the world, according to the W.H.O.</p> <p>The Omicron wave has yet to crest in what the agency calls the Western Pacific region, which includes Oceania, the Pacific islands and East Asian countries like China and South Korea that recently celebrated the Lunar New Year, a holiday period that typically involves large family gatherings. Cases in the region rose 19 percent last week, the W.H.O. reported.</p> <p>In the Pacific, two island nations that had no confirmed cases until recently are now grappling with the arrival of the virus. In Tonga, an outbreak began after ships brought aid to help the country recover from a volcanic eruption and tsunami in January. And the Cook Islands reported its first case last week.</p> <p>The W.H.O. said caseloads were falling in the other regions. But cases are still rising in parts of Europe, including in Slovakia, Latvia and Belarus. And in Russia, new cases have increased by 79 percent over the past two weeks, according to the Center for Systems Science and Engineering at Johns Hopkins University.</p> <p>On Wednesday, Maria Van Kerkhove, the W.H.O.’s Covid-19 technical lead, cautioned that a drop in testing rates around the world has meant the reported global case numbers might not reflect the true spread of the virus.</p>

“We need to be careful about interpreting too much this downward trend,” [she said](#). She said the bigger concern was the increase in reported deaths from Covid-19 for the sixth week in a row.

The W.H.O.’s [Eastern Mediterranean](#) region, which includes the Middle East, reported the most fatalities, and the Western Pacific region reported the second-most, according to the W.H.O.

In the Americas, many countries [did not move fast enough to slow the transmission of BA.1](#), W.H.O. officials said on Wednesday, and they must be better prepared for whatever version of the coronavirus comes next.

“This will not be the last variant, and the future of the pandemic is still extremely uncertain,” said Dr. Carissa F. Etienne, the director of the W.H.O.’s [Pan American Health Organization](#), adding that “a new variant could emerge at any time.”

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HEADLINE	02/17 SKorea new approach: ‘select and focus’
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/17/world/asia/south-korea-covid-spread.html?action=click&module=RelatedLinks&pgtype=Article
GIST	<p>SEOUL — For the past two years, South Korea waged a successful battle against Covid-19 with a so-called three-T strategy: it ramped up lab “tests” to ferret out infections, it “traced” contacts using modern technology, and it “treated” patients by keeping them in isolation, where they were monitored by the government.</p> <p>But as the fast-spreading Omicron variant threatens to overwhelm the public health system, that strategy now appears unsustainable — and it may even be pointless, South Korean officials say. Now, they are shifting the country’s pandemic focus to a new game plan: “select and focus.”</p> <p>In the past week, South Korea has begun asking patients who test positive to simply look after themselves at home, while the country redirects resources to those who are most vulnerable. This new approach has unsettled people who have grown used to the government’s heavy-handed virus intervention, and as the number of people fending for themselves at home has surged, so have the complaints.</p> <p>Some say they were not put through when they called pandemic hotlines seeking information. Being left alone has felt like “home abandonment” to many.</p> <p>Medical supplies the government promised to deliver — such as thermometers, oximeters, hand sanitizer and other pandemic necessities — have failed to arrive on time.</p> <p>“The government’s partially hands-off approach is a shock to people who have dutifully followed what the government told them to do, like wearing masks and getting vaccinated, and in return expected it to take responsibility for protecting their lives,” said Kim Woo-joo, president of the Korean Vaccine Society. “It could feel like a survival-of-the-fittest situation.”</p> <p>By Tuesday, the government had mobilized thousands of neighborhood clinics to help ease the bottleneck for those seeking help at home. Health officials have tried to reassure people that despite initial disturbances, the recent policy shift was inevitable, compelled — and even justified — by the Omicron data.</p> <p>Until last year, South Korea had never had more than 7,849 new patients a day. But as Omicron became the dominant variant, the daily caseload soared to 93,135 on Thursday. The government expects up to 170,000 new patients a day later this month. That is simply too many patients to provide all of them with the same time and attention that it once did.</p>

Fortunately, Omicron has proved less dangerous than the Delta variant. Even as Omicron has surged, the number of Covid-19 fatalities dropped from the daily record of 109 on Dec. 23 to 36 on Thursday. The number of seriously ill patients in hospitals fell from around 1,000 in mid-December to 389 on Thursday. People in their 60s and older accounted for 93 percent of all fatalities.

“We must use our limited resources more effectively, focusing on preventing high-risk patients from getting seriously ill or dying,” said Health Minister Kwon Deok-cheol.

Under its new strategy, the government will dedicate its monitoring efforts to high-risk patients who are staying at home — those in their 60s and older and people with pre-existing medical conditions — supplying them with at-home treatment kits and calling twice a day to check on their condition.

Other patients who test positive must monitor their own symptoms at home and seek help only when their condition worsens. Health workers will no longer call them once a day or supply food and other daily necessities, as they did until last week. Instead, the patients’ family members are now free to go out for essential supplies if they are vaccinated.

Critics have said the government’s new approach disadvantages underprivileged classes, like poor people who lack access to medical care or other social services.

“It’s tantamount to letting the virus spread, rather than doing everything possible to contain its spread,” said Woo Seoc-kyun, a representative of the Association of Physicians for Humanism, a nationwide doctors’ group. “It threatens to reverse what we have achieved so far through a tight management of the pandemic, like keeping the number of fatalities low.”

The government said that even if the daily caseload soared, it would still consider lifting restrictions further so that South Korea could switch to a “life with Covid-19,” treating the disease like “seasonal flu,” provided that the number of seriously ill patients was kept under control.

Whether the government can keep up with the Omicron surge well enough to make such a shift is still up for debate. This week, the United States [put](#) South Korea on its “Do Not Travel” list. The number of people being treated at home surged from 150,000 last week to 314,000 on Thursday and is expected to grow.

And so, too, could the number of seriously ill.

Jung Jae-hun, a professor of preventive medicine at Gachon University in South Korea, estimated that the daily caseload would peak at more than 200,000 and stay at that level throughout March. Another estimate, by the government’s National Institute for Mathematical Sciences, predicted as many as 360,000 new patients a day by early next month.

The authorities are preparing more hospital beds for the seriously ill as a precaution. They are also asking neighborhood clinics to pitch in to treat at-home patients remotely. Nearly half of the workers at government-run health clinics in Gyeonggi Province, which surrounds Seoul, called for an immediate relief from the “extreme stress” caused by a crushing workload, according to [a recent survey](#).

Last week, South Korea retired its [GPS monitoring tool](#) used to enforce isolation — a smartphone app that alerted health workers when patients left home without permission. Many of the 60,000 workers who monitored those movements on the app will be now redeployed to assist vulnerable patients at home, delivering medicine and manning hotlines.

“There has been a bottleneck in putting calls through, as we were trying to handle a sudden spike in patients,” said Lee Ki-il, a senior disease-control coordinator.

The government’s changing attitude was not solely influenced by data. An increasingly impatient public has also become more vocal about the need for a new approach.

Since South Korea began banning unvaccinated people from entering restaurants, cafes, shopping malls and other crowded places, a flurry of lawsuits has followed. The litigants claimed that the restrictions discriminated against the unvaccinated and violated the freedom of citizens, as well as the rights of business owners.

“The government is infringing upon our constitutionally guaranteed right to education,” [said](#) Yang Dae-rim, a high-school senior who joined a lawsuit against the government’s plan to ban unvaccinated teenagers from [the after-school cramming programs known as hagwon](#), and from [study cafes](#).

Mr. Yang and others separately sued President Moon Jae-in for “abuse of official power.”

The government later removed hagwon and study cafes from the list of places that required proof of vaccination.

After two years of battling the virus, South Korea has learned that the cost of maintaining its vigorous pandemic protocols is unsustainable in the long term, said Dr. Jung, the Gachon University professor. More than 86 percent of the population has received at least two doses of a vaccine.

The government has also urged people to get booster shots, noting that more than 60 percent of those who died or were seriously ill had received no shots or only one. But vaccination alone has not been enough to end the pandemic.

“We cannot end it like we end a war,” Dr. Jung said. “It will just gradually become something we don’t have to take seriously.”

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HEADLINE	02/18 ‘Fortress Australia’ message: come back
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/18/travel/australia-tourism-covid.html
GIST	<p>Moments after the Australian government announced that it would reopen the country’s borders to international travelers later this month, Emily Barrett locked in a fare for a flight to Sydney. The 32-year-old nanny from Palo Alto, Calif., spent three days researching and talking to Australian friends before she decided to book her trip to the island continent, which for two years had some of the world’s strictest border controls and longest lockdowns aimed at controlling the spread of the coronavirus.</p> <p>“They all said, ‘if we go back into a lockdown now, people will go into the streets,’” she said. Her two-week trip is scheduled to start a few days after the border opens on Feb. 21.</p> <p>Potential travelers and tourism operators alike are cautiously optimistic about “Fortress Australia’s” reopening, but many wonder if the isolated nation’s ongoing Covid restrictions — such as vaccine and testing requirements, as well as mask mandates — will make the return of international travel more of a trickle than a splash. Australia’s reputation for rigidity and reclusiveness during the pandemic — at odds with the inviting, easygoing nature portrayed by the country’s tourism boards — may also be a hurdle to overcome.</p> <p>“There is no doubt that a full recovery will take time, but we are confident that the demand for Australia is strong,” said Phillipa Harrison, the managing director of Tourism Australia, the country’s tourism board.</p> <p>Tourism was one of the fastest growing sectors in Australia’s economy before the pandemic, contributing 45 billion Australian dollars in 2019, or \$32 billion.</p> <p>Australia is among the world’s most immunized countries for Covid-19, with 94 percent of people over 16 fully vaccinated. Through 2020 and 2021, the country pursued a tough “zero Covid” strategy that closed national and state borders; restricted Australians from returning home and even leaving; enforced monthslong lockdowns and required its few visitors to undergo expensive hotel quarantines. Surging cases</p>

of the Omicron variant of the coronavirus in January, which persist, but [have since declined](#), tipped most of the country into a new [‘living with the virus’ phase](#).

“It’s about coming back so the virus is under our control, whereas we felt that the virus was controlling us,” said Catherine Bennett, an epidemiologist at Deakin University in Melbourne, adding that opening the borders represented a turning point. “This is saying: We’re ready for this.”

Australia’s walls come down

Australia’s grand reopening comes with a few ground rules. Travelers entering the country [must be fully vaccinated](#) to avoid a costly two-week hotel quarantine, and must test before arrival — somewhat common requirements for travel now.

But it will take a little more time for Australia’s welcome mat to roll out all the way. The entire state of Western Australia — a third of Australia’s vast land mass, but home to just 10 percent of the population — has essentially [been closed](#) to both international travelers and even vaccinated Australian citizens for most of the pandemic. It [plans to reopen](#) to vaccinated travelers on March 3, with testing rules on arrival.

The state, which has reported about 2,900 total cases and 10 deaths since the pandemic began, is home to Perth — one of the world’s most remote major cities — more than 7,000 miles of coastline, the Kimberley region’s dramatic sandstone gorges and wine destinations like Margaret River. While the federal government can open the nation’s borders, the states can still set their own Covid restrictions, including entry rules.

“We desperately want people to come back,” said Graeme Skeggs, a general manager at [Adam’s Pinnacle Tours](#), one of Western Australia’s larger tour companies, which, until the pandemic, operated luxury tours of the state’s renowned coastlines and landscapes. Much of their business evaporated after Covid struck, and some smaller operators the company worked with have closed. “Two years is a lot longer than any of us thought,” Mr. Skeggs said.

While many operators who rely on foreign tourists are hopeful, it’s clear that there is no simple return to prepandemic times.

China overtook New Zealand as Australia’s largest foreign tourist market for the first time in 2017, and 1.3 million visitors from mainland China spent more than [\\$12 billion Australian dollars](#), or nearly \$9 billion, in 2019, about 27 percent of the year’s international visitor spend.

With China still severely limiting outbound travel, that leaves a gaping hole in Australia’s tourism economy.

Michelle Chen opened the [Apollo Surfcoast Chinese Restaurant](#) in 2012 along Victoria’s Great Ocean Road — one of the state’s major scenic attractions, about a 2.5-hour drive from Melbourne — to cater to the hundreds of Chinese day-trippers who would stream off buses each day on their way to view the Twelve Apostles, a limestone rock formation farther down the coast.

When Australia closed to Chinese travelers on Feb. 1, 2020, she lost “nearly a hundred percent” of her business. In another stroke of misfortune, the restaurant burned down in April of last year. She reopened in December a few doors down. But Ms. Chen is not expecting her core customers to return for a long time.

She’s even revamped her menu, which used to feature dishes like Sichuan chile chicken that appealed to mainland Chinese visitors. Now the menu is “80 percent Australian-Chinese,” Ms. Chen said, with milder offerings like Mongolian beef. “I find I can’t sell the Chinese-Chinese dishes.”

Another thing desperately she’s looking forward to with the return of international travel: more workers. “Everywhere is shortage of labor,” she said.

The Djokovic drama

In January, the Australian Open — one of the country's biggest sporting events, which draws hundreds of millions of viewers annually — became a media circus when Novak Djokovic, the world's number one men's tennis player, who is not vaccinated, was [detained and finally deported](#) from Melbourne because of his risk for "civil unrest." The drama, which stretched on for 10 days, triggered protests in Australia from groups who believed the battle was the latest example of Covid-related mandates trampling public freedoms.

"Strong borders are fundamental to the Australian way of life," the country's prime minister, Scott Morrison, said after the decision to cancel the tennis star's visa.

Australia's fixation with border security is highly contentious within the country, particularly its [harsh treatment of asylum seekers](#), but ultimately plays well with voters. But how would Mr. Djokovic's unceremonious booting fit into Australia's new "come on in" narrative?

"From our view, it really highlights the strength of Australia's border policies," said Chris Allison, Tourism Australia's acting manager of the Americas. While Mr. Djokovic's treatment was divisive, he said, it showed that "Australia has zero tolerance in terms of requiring vaccinations to come into the country," and affirms the message of "how we're trying to reopen our borders safely and protect the health of the nation."

But time — and bookings — will tell if long-haul travelers are willing to bet on Australia's reopening.

Some prefer to wait and see. Australia was where "everyone wanted to go" before the pandemic, said Samantha Carranza, a manager at [Sky Tours](#), a travel agency in downtown Los Angeles. But "there isn't much demand right now," she said, adding that Australia's protectiveness has made her clients cautious to travel there. "No one's sure if it's really open or not. Will it close again, will they get stuck there?"

The data shows that interest in travel to Australia is already on the rise: Flight bookings were up 200 percent following the border-opening announcement compared to the week before, according to Forward Keys, a travel analytics company.

"While the immediate jump in bookings is encouraging, the overall booking volume compared to the equivalent week in 2019 is modest," said Olivier Ponti, the firm's vice president of insights.

"I imagine there will be more and more confidence over the course of the year," said Christie Hudson, a senior public relations manager at Expedia, the major online travel agency. "People are really ready to start thinking about these bucket-list trips again. I think for a lot of Americans, Australia is a bucket-list-type trip."

Opening Aboriginal Australia to the world, cautiously

Cultural experiences led by Australia's diverse Indigenous groups will be a focus of marketing to overseas travelers, according to Tourism Australia. But in the Northern Territory, the region with the highest proportion of Indigenous people, many remote communities are [barred to outsiders](#) until at least March 3 in an effort to protect the residents there from infection.

International visitors are key for the region's Indigenous tourism sector: Before the pandemic, [nearly 70 percent](#) of overseas visitors to the Northern Territory engaged in Aboriginal tourism activities, compared to 16 percent of Australian tourists.

Victor Cooper, who owns and operates [Ayal Aboriginal Tours](#) in Kakadu National Park, said he used to welcome visitors from Europe and the United States to his "grandmother's country," where he taught them about bush tucker (native foods) and told traditional stories of the land.

"I had a really, really good thing in the overseas market, it took a long time to get that," Mr. Cooper said. He has not had any overseas bookings since the reopening announcement, and worries things may be "complicated" for a while yet. "I don't think I'm going to get the clients I used to have back in 2019."

	<p>Other tourism operators are already seeing signs of recovery, which gives them hope for a better year ahead.</p> <p>“It’s good to see people again,” said Dave Gordon, an employee at Wake Up Bondi, a hostel on Sydney’s famous beach, of the limited number of travelers who have been filtering back in recent months. “It’s exciting.”</p> <p>Since the news of the border reopening, booking numbers for later in the year have risen, he said.</p> <p>The first year of the pandemic was “quite a struggle,” he said. To survive, the hostel, which is on Bondi Beach’s main thoroughfare, slashed its rates and accepted longer-term lodgers, and even closed for a period.</p> <p>But the border opening removes a major hurdle for him and other operators across the country, who want to convey a clear message for would-be tourists thinking of Australia: “Come!” he said. “This is the time to travel.”</p>
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HEADLINE	02/18 Vaccines embraced by world but not China
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/18/business/china-coronavirus-vaccines.html
GIST	<p>China has done everything in its power to keep the virus outside its borders and protect its people — almost.</p> <p>It has kept cases and deaths remarkably low through a “zero-Covid” strategy that has involved tracking and tracing every case, closed its borders and locked down cities of millions of people. It fostered domestic vaccines that allowed the country to carry out a massive inoculation effort.</p> <p>But two years into the pandemic, China’s 1.4 billion people still don’t have access to one of the most effective coronavirus vaccines the world has to offer. Those vaccines use the breakthrough mRNA technology that was developed and approved in the West, and they have been embraced by dozens of countries.</p> <p>The effectiveness of Chinese vaccines has been in doubt — partly because they use a century-old method for inoculation. Last spring, the country said it would approve BioNTech, the German mRNA shot made in partnership with Pfizer. Months later, China said that it was also close to producing its own mRNA vaccine. Neither are available today.</p> <p>China’s lack of an mRNA shot — and its delay in approving a viable foreign option — has poked holes in Beijing’s victorious pandemic narrative and prompted experts to question whether the country’s go-it-alone approach is less triumphant than officials would have the world believe.</p> <p>Under Xi Jinping, China’s top leader, the country has turned more inward, promoting self-reliance and championing development in areas like semiconductors and other technology. The recognition of a foreign mRNA vaccine now appears to be a part of that deeply political exercise.</p> <p>China is so committed to competing with the United States and the West on science and technology that some in the scientific community say it is hard to imagine that the state hasn’t pulled out all the stops to develop a homegrown mRNA vaccine. That China has fallen behind on that front, and failed to approve a readily available foreign option, has left many experts baffled.</p> <p>“We don’t know how decisions are made nowadays in China, but a better vaccine would definitely help in maintaining a zero-Covid policy,” said Jin Dongyan, a virologist at the University of Hong Kong who has urged his peers in mainland China to approve the BioNTech vaccine.</p>

“They are presenting to the world that they are doing well in vaccine development,” he said of officials in Beijing. “And it would be embarrassing for them to show the opposite to the Chinese people.”

China [says](#) its virus policies, which include strict lockdowns, have prevented millions of people from getting sick. But as a consequence, scientists say, the population has not built up enough natural immunity to help fight severe infection, making reliable vaccines even more crucial. And there is slowly mounting pressure on the country to pursue a new approach.

In recent months, officials have begun openly discussing the need to introduce better vaccine technology. “We should learn about the good things in other countries, such as mRNA vaccines,” Zhong Nanshan, China’s top respiratory scientist, [said](#) at a conference in December. “They have spent years on the research and managed to develop mRNA vaccines in just a few months.”

China last week approved for emergency use a Covid-19 pill made by Pfizer called Paxlovid, a move that some experts said could help change Beijing’s pandemic strategy.

It wasn’t that long ago that China appeared ready to introduce an mRNA vaccine for Covid-19. Shanghai Fosun Pharmaceutical, BioNTech’s Chinese partner, told investors last year that regulators would approve its mRNA vaccine for use in China by July 2021. The company, which had conducted clinical trials in late 2020, said that it could make as many as a billion doses a year.

That optimism has since faded. Chinese authorities now say they are still reviewing documents in order to “make a final decision on the approval of our vaccine,” a spokeswoman for BioNTech said.

Fosun did not respond to a request for comment.

The approval process for Sinopharm and Sinovac — which manufacture the vaccines that are available in China — looked much different. Chinese regulators changed the rules to allow both Chinese drugmakers to submit their trial data behind schedule. Sinopharm’s vaccine was approved a week after the company [filed its](#) application, in December 2020.

Vaccines from Sinovac and Sinopharm help prevent hospitalization and death, but their ability to reduce transmission with variants such as Omicron is still in question. [Sinovac](#) has shown to be only 51 percent effective against preventing symptomatic disease, according to scientists in Brazil. The World Health Organization said [Sinopharm](#) has an efficacy of 78 percent.

Though the W.H.O. has signed off on both Chinese vaccines for emergency use, most Western governments favor mRNA technology.

As approval for BioNTech languished, China said that it was close to producing a homegrown mRNA shot called ARCoVax. Two private drugmakers and China’s Academy of Military Medical Sciences said they were preparing to make 200 million doses by October, a Communist Party newspaper [reported](#) in September.

Had that happened, it would have been a remarkable achievement for China.

Unlike traditional vaccines that use an inactivated virus to trigger a response by the immune system, mRNA vaccines use a genetic molecule that assists cells to make proteins that can set off an immune response in the body. This response creates antibodies that are then used to fight the virus.

The first mRNA vaccines for the coronavirus were based on research conducted over decades by scientists in different parts of the world. It took the Western pharmaceutical companies Pfizer, BioNTech and Moderna just over a year to take those advances and apply them to a new kind of vaccine able to prevent serious illness and death from Covid-19.

The [final version](#) of the mRNA vaccines produced by Pfizer and Moderna came together with the help of a multibillion dollar program under the Trump administration called Operation Warp Speed. The Food and Drug Administration determined in 2020 that the BioNTech vaccine has an efficacy rate of 95 percent.

“This is not trivial technology,” said John P. Moore, a virologist at Weill Cornell Medicine. “So trying to reverse engineer it from scratch is one of those things where you ask, ‘What could possibly go wrong?’”

If China is pursuing a program similar to Operation Warp Speed, it has not said anything about it publicly. One of the private companies helping to develop ARCoVax is Suzhou Abogen, a start-up founded in 2019 by a scientist who used to work at Moderna. Before the pandemic, Abogen was developing mRNA drugs for cancer, one of China’s biggest epidemics.

The other drugmaker, Walvax, is a publicly listed pharmaceutical group. The two companies’ partnership with the Chinese Academy of Military Medical Sciences suggests strong government backing, though Beijing has not mentioned an official collaboration.

Last year, the United States added the Chinese Academy of Military Medical Sciences to an [entity list](#), a federal trade restriction list, accusing it of using biotechnology to support activities like “brain control weaponry.” The designation would make it difficult to export any final vaccine product it develops.

Researchers recently [published](#) the details of an initial trial of the ARCoVax vaccine involving 120 volunteers. They found it to be safe, and said it produced a moderate level of antibodies but caused more side effects, like fever, than the BioNTech shot.

Abogen and Walvax did not respond to requests for comment. A senior executive at Walvax told Reuters last month that it had recruited 28,000 people for a large, Phase 3 clinical trial. ARCoVax is also being tested as a booster.

One recent study showed that two doses of Sinovac boosted with an mRNA shot offered strong antibody protection against both the Delta and Omicron variants. But it is still unclear when the ARCoVax vaccine will be available in China.

And as the weeks go by, approval for BioNTech seems to grow more elusive.

“It’s very difficult to predict actually when we will get approval,” said Sean Marett, chief business and commercial officer of BioNTech, speaking at a health care conference last month. “But China remains for us an extremely important market,” he added. “We’re very, very committed to it.”

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HEADLINE	02/17 Covid testing firm blocked from operating
SOURCE	https://www.king5.com/article/news/health/coronavirus/covid-testing-company-blocked-washington/281-9516e357-279d-471c-9315-eb07f443cce9
GIST	<p>OLYMPIA, Wash. – An Illinois-based COVID-19 testing company has been blocked from operating in Washington after the Attorney General’s Office filed a lawsuit arguing it violated the Consumer Protection Act when it deliberately failed to deliver prompt, valid and accurate test results.</p> <p>The investigation into Center for COVID Control’s operations began in January after the Washington Attorney General’s Office received several reports of possible fake COVID-19 testing sites.</p> <p>The Attorney General’s Office announced at the end of January that it filed a lawsuit in King County Superior Court against the company for “providing invalid, false and delayed COVID-19 test results to Washingtonians, or sometimes providing no results at all.”</p>

	<p>"The company's unlawful practices included storing tests in garbage bags for over a week rather than properly refrigerating them, and backdating sample collection dates so that stale samples would still be processed," the lawsuit said.</p> <p>Washington Attorney Bob Ferguson announced Thursday his office obtained a preliminary injunction in the case. In the order, the court blocked the company from operating in Washington during the case.</p> <p>"Calling this conduct a 'scam' is an understatement," Ferguson said. "It was unethical, illegal, and jeopardized the health of thousands of Washingtonians. Our investigation put a stop to Center for COVID Control's Washington operations."</p> <p>The Washington State Department of Health (DOH) said it was aware of at least 10 testing sites operated by the Center for COVID Control. The DOH said the sites weren't licensed by the state.</p> <p>The testing sites were operating in several counties including Snohomish, King, Kitsap, Pierce, and Yakima counties</p> <p>The company shut down its testing centers in Washington around Jan. 13, according to the Attorney General's Office.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/17 Hospitals warn: still at capacity
SOURCE	https://www.king5.com/article/news/local/hospitals-capacity-omicron-covid-masks-mandate/281-f0bfd465-bb5b-47b8-b88e-55af6ca13692
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — While mask mandates and COVID vaccine requirements are seemingly being dropped left and right, the UW Medicine hospital system is warning that capacity remains virtually maxed out across all four of its campuses.</p> <p>Dr. John Lynch, medical director of infection control at Harborview Medical Center, was outspoken at the height of the omicron surge just over a month ago warning the public that even his hospital, home to the state's only Level I adult and pediatric trauma center, was approaching a crisis situation with the number of patients flooding the system.</p> <p>Now, Lynch is again warning the public that not much has changed despite the falling number of omicron cases and hospitalizations.</p> <p>"For the most part, every bed is full. And when I say a bed: that's a bed that requires a nurse, a therapist, a doctor or a nutritionist, EVS (environmental services), facilities and engineering, making sure everything's working," Lynch said. "Those are all part of an ecosystem around that bed. And I would say most of those spaces are full across our system."</p> <p>As hospitals and health officials have explained in countless briefings since the pandemic started taking its toll, hospitals have had to wage war against the virus on multiple fronts, especially bed capacity and staff burnout, which go hand in hand.</p> <p>Additionally, for the past few months hospitals have been dealing with a backlog of patients who are stuck in the hospital with nowhere else to go due to red tape or staff shortages at long-term care facilities.</p> <p>Currently, UW Medicine has roughly 215 patients that are pending discharge to other facilities following acute care treatment, according to spokeswoman Susan Gregg. These patients take up beds that could go to other patients needing hospitalization.</p> <p>The problem is only expected to get worse as more patients come in for surgeries and other procedures that were delayed during the pandemic due to the high capacity and risk of COVID infection.</p>

	<p>“Behind all this decrease in cases and hospitalizations, which is wonderful news, we have to continue to understand the impact this has had on our entire community. Everyone has been impacted negatively by this pandemic,” Lynch said.</p> <p>This week, King County announced that it is ending its vaccination requirement for places like bars and restaurants next month.</p> <p>Gov. Jay Inslee also announced that he is ending masking mandates for most places as well towards the end of March, but Lynch is warning that masks shouldn’t go anywhere and should be left up to each individual.</p> <p>“Surgical masks, medical masks, K95s, N95s and similar shouldn't go anywhere. If you feel that that's the right move for you, I would encourage to actually support people to continue making those choices for themselves,” Lynch said.</p> <p>As of Feb. 15, one in every four hospital patients throughout Washington state was COVID positive with 66% of the total population fully vaccinated, according to the Washington Department of Health.</p> <p>As for King County, the 7-day average for case rates on Feb. 13 was over 1,000 cases, which is still higher than at any other point during the pandemic.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/17 SPD losing officers; struggles to replace
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/local/seattle-police-department-losing-officers-and-struggling-to-replace-them
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — Two officers who retired from the Seattle Police Department they say as a result of the defund police movement are speaking out about what happened and the city's efforts to combat crime.</p> <p>Former officers Tom Umporowicz and Clayton Powell spoke to KOMO News about their time as SPD officers as the department is working to add new cops to the force in order to better respond to violent crimes that have been reported in Seattle.</p> <p>Both paint a grim future if the city doesn't get tough on crime.</p> <p>“I didn’t sign up to be a cop to stand by and watch other people harm themselves or harm other people,” said Umporowicz, who retired early last year as a detective sergeant after spending nearly 30 years on the job.</p> <p>He arrested thousands of suspects during his law enforcement career, ran the department's human trafficking division and worked undercover vice squad at night.</p> <p>Although he loved policing, Umporowicz said as the defund movement swept the nation, everything changed, including the way he and others were treated by the department and city leaders.</p> <p>Clayton Powell also ended his 27-plus year career with Seattle police last year for similar reasons, retiring as a mobile precinct operator in West Seattle.</p> <p>“It came to the point that it was just disheartening to get up and force myself to go work sometimes, but you know we still did our job,” he said. “I might still be there if some of the internal stuff within the city wasn’t going on.”</p> <p>Both of the former officers said new recruits for Seattle police may find that the most frustrating part of the job is feeling as though the department's top brass and city leadership are working against them.</p> <p>Powell predicts that the Seattle Police Department could find itself in crisis mode for decades to come unless there is a major shift in the city's attitude toward its police.</p>

“There’s gonna have to be some conditions other than financially to encourage applicants to want to apply with a department that has that political atmosphere and those other, less than desirable qualities,” he said.

“We need political support from our politicians,” said Mike Solan, president of the Seattle Police Officer’s Guild. “You cannot time and time again attack a police officer for just being police. At some point people are going to get tired of that and move on, and evidence of that movement is this agency being almost half down from what it should be at.”

Over the past two years, SPD has been losing officers far faster than the department can gain them, data shows.

- **In 2020**, 186 officers left the department as only 51 new officers were hired.
- **In 2021**, 171 officers exited the agency with only 81 new officers brought on board.
- **In 2022** so far, 20 officers left in January alone and only five new officers have joined the force since then.

“We’re at 878 deployable line officer and sergeants to serve this community that’s a stunning data point,” Solan said. “We should be about 1,400 people for a city our size, but if we’re under 900 people, this is a crisis we’ve never seen before.”

For the department to get to a place where it can provide public safety for all of Seattle, interim Seattle police Chief Adrian Diaz told KOMO News that the department needs to hire at least 100 new officers each year for the next five years, to make up for the hundreds lost.

Umporowicz said people should keep in mind that it takes around 12 to 15 months for a new recruit to be trained before they can go out and patrol the streets on their own.

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HEADLINE	02/17 Invasion fear rises after artillery barrage
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/17/world/europe/ukraine-conflict-russia-military.html
GIST	<p>STANYTSLIA LUHANSKA, Ukraine — Residents near Ukraine’s front line rushed into basements for cover Thursday as exchanges of artillery fire with Russian-backed separatists reached their most intense level in months, an ominous development amid Western fears that Russia might use the fighting as a pretext to invade Ukraine.</p> <p>As the United States and Russia traded conflicting accounts over whether Russian forces were really pulling back from the Ukrainian border, as Moscow has insisted, the separatists claimed they had come under fire from the Ukrainians. That is precisely the sort of incident Western officials have warned Russia might try to use to justify military action.</p> <p>At the White House, President Biden said “every indication we have is they’re prepared to go into Ukraine, attack Ukraine.” He said the United States had “reason to believe” that Russia was “engaged in a false flag operation to have an excuse to go in.”</p> <p>Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken made an unscheduled trip to New York, where he told the United Nations Security Council that American intelligence “indicates clearly” that Russian forces surrounding the country from three sides “are preparing to launch an attack against Ukraine in the coming days.”</p> <p>The escalation of tensions rippled throughout the markets, where stock prices plunged.</p> <p>Russia continued to insist Thursday that it had no plans to invade, issuing new updates about troop withdrawals and dismissing the American invasion warnings as “information terrorism.”</p> <p>The Russian government also published a lengthy response to American proposals made last month to ease tensions, maintaining the Kremlin’s push to regain a sphere of influence in Eastern Europe and</p>

issuing a vague warning of new military deployments. If the United States does not accede to its demands, the document said, “Russia will be forced to respond, including through the implementation of measures of a military-technical character.”

In eastern Ukraine on Thursday, where a kindergarten was shelled, the spike in violence evoked the sort of scenario that Western leaders have been warning of amid the enormous Russian troop buildup surrounding Ukraine.

President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia this week repeated his false claim that Ukraine was carrying out a “genocide” against Russian speakers in the country’s east, while the Russian authorities announced an investigation into supposed “mass graves” of Russian-speaking victims of Ukrainian forces.

And on Thursday, the Kremlin’s spokesman, Dmitri S. Peskov, offered an ominous assessment. “The excessive concentration of Ukrainian forces near the contact line, together with possible provocations, can pose terrible danger,” he said.

Mr. Blinken told the Security Council that Moscow appeared to be setting the stage.

“Russia plans to manufacture a pretext for its attack,” he said, citing a “so-called terrorist bombing” or “a fake, even a real attack” with chemical weapons. “This could be a violent event that Russia will blame on Ukraine,” he said, “or an outrageous accusation that Russia will level against the Ukrainian government.”

If so, it would not be the first time.

When Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, it did so after claiming that Russian speakers there were threatened by the pro-Western revolution in Kyiv, which the Kremlin described as a fascist coup. And in 2008, Russia invaded Georgia after the Georgian Army moved into a Russian-backed separatist enclave there.

The skirmishing in Eastern Europe between Ukrainian forces and Kremlin-backed separatists is longstanding, but Thursday’s violence was the worst since a cease-fire was reached two years ago.

The combatants exchanged not just shells but accusations. The Ukrainian military said three adult civilians had been wounded at the kindergarten, and on the other side, a Russian-backed separatist leader claimed Ukraine had launched mortar fire “barbarically and cynically.”

The artillery fire began in the early morning and did not let up with the advent of evening. The sharp crack of explosions echoed off buildings and flashes of light from incoming shells silhouetted trees.

The days of whiplash developments made unmistakable the volatility of a crisis that American officials fear could lead to an assault by one of the world’s most powerful militaries against Ukraine, Europe’s second-biggest country, a development younger Europeans never thought they would see.

Still, in Moscow, many analysts remained convinced that Mr. Putin’s troop buildup was a bluff — a means to pressure the West to rule out Ukrainian membership in NATO and to force the alliance to roll back its presence in Eastern Europe.

Whatever his true intentions, the diplomatic and military crisis has also become an intense battle of public messaging, with both Moscow and Washington deploying vivid imagery and rhetoric to discredit the other side.

Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III said at a meeting of his NATO counterparts in Brussels that Russia continued to move troops closer to Ukraine’s borders. He said it was also adding combat aircraft and stocking up on blood supplies in anticipation of casualties on the battlefield.

“I know firsthand that you don’t do these sorts of things for no reason,” said Mr. Austin, a retired four-star Army general. “And you certainly don’t do them if you’re getting ready to pack up and go home.”

Early Friday morning, soon after arriving in Munich for an annual security conference, the State Department’s spokesman said Mr. Blinken had accepted a proposal to meet with the Russian foreign minister, Sergey V. Lavrov, late next week.

The spokesman, Ned Price, did not provide a time or place for the meeting, the two diplomats’ second in two months, except to say it would not happen if Russia further invaded Ukraine. “If they do invade in the coming days, it will make clear they were never serious about diplomacy,” Mr. Price said in the statement.

Although there are some 150,000 Russian troops surrounding Ukraine, Russia has cast the deployments as little more than military drills. On Thursday, international reporters were invited to visit Belarus — a close Kremlin ally — to see for themselves. There, amid the roar of Russian and Belarusian firepower, they were treated to some mocking comments directed at Western intelligence agencies by Belarus’s strongman leader, Aleksandr G. Lukashenko.

“There will be no invasion tomorrow,” Mr. Lukashenko said as the military drills were staged at a desolate military training ground southeast of Minsk, the country’s capital. “Are you still entertaining this crazy idea?”

Mr. Lukashenko was scheduled to meet with Mr. Putin in Moscow on Friday, and pledged that he was willing to keep Russian troops in his country for “as long as necessary.”

Western officials say the Russian troops gathered in Belarus are part of what makes the current invasion threat so dire, allowing the Kremlin to attack from the north as well as from the Russian mainland to the east and from Crimea and the Black Sea to the south.

A key question now is whether Russia will continue its diplomatic engagement with the West. While Mr. Putin and Mr. Lavrov held a flurry of meetings and calls with their Western counterparts in recent weeks, there were no more such interactions on the calendar for the coming days.

Mr. Blinken said that the State Department was “evaluating” the Russian document delivered to Washington on Thursday and that he had proposed to Mr. Lavrov that the two meet in Europe next week.

The State Department spokesman said the Russians had responded with proposed meeting dates for late next week, “which we are accepting, provided there is no further Russian invasion of Ukraine.”

The document indicated there was only a narrow diplomatic way forward.

It said an American proposal to allow Russia to inspect U.S. missile defense bases in Poland and Romania that the Kremlin sees as a threat could “be further taken into consideration.” It also said that Russia saw “the potential for mutually acceptable agreements” on the subject of long-range bomber flights near national borders. And it said that Russia was “open in principle” to a discussion of replacing the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty, a landmark 1987 nuclear arms-control pact that the Trump administration abandoned in 2019, after accusing Russia of violating it.

But Moscow insisted that those elements could be agreed upon only as part of a package that addressed Russia’s central demands.

“We welcome the readiness of the United States for appropriate consultations,” the document said. “However, this work cannot replace the settlement of the key problems posed by Russia.”

	<p>Among Russia’s demands was that NATO militaries halt all cooperation with Ukraine and remove all Western weaponry delivered to the country in recent years to help it defend against Russia and Russian-backed separatists. The document also repeated Russia’s central demands for “security guarantees” that Mr. Putin first described last November, including that NATO assure that Ukraine would never join the alliance and that it would pull back troops stationed in countries that joined the alliance after 1997.</p> <p>“Our ‘red lines’ and fundamental security interests are being ignored, and Russia’s inalienable right to assure them is being rejected,” the document said.</p> <p>Western leaders have rejected the demand to pull back troops or bar certain countries from NATO, but have hinted at the possibility of Ukraine itself swearing off membership in the alliance.</p> <p>And while the letter reiterated recent denials by Russian officials of any plans to invade Ukraine, it also warned of an unspecified military response if those demands were not met, one that analysts have interpreted as the potential deployment of advanced missile systems in a new, more threatening posture.</p> <p>“No ‘Russian invasion of Ukraine’, which the United States and its allies have officially been announcing since last fall, is happening, nor is one being planned,” the document said. But if the United States does not provide “firm, legally binding guarantees of our security,” it said, “Russia will be forced to respond, including through the implementation of measures of a military-technical character.”</p>
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HEADLINE	02/17 US message to Russia: prove us wrong
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/17/us/politics/blinken-russia-ukraine-predictions.html
GIST	<p>MUNICH — President Biden and his top aides acknowledge they are risking American credibility as they constantly renew the alarm that Russia is only “several days” away from triggering an unprovoked land war in Europe that could kill tens of thousands of Ukrainians in its opening hours, and plunge the world back into something resembling the Cold War.</p> <p>But Mr. Biden’s aides say they are willing to take that risk.</p> <p>They would rather be accused of hyperbole and fearmongering than be proven right, they say, if that’s what it takes to deter Russian President Vladimir V. Putin from pursuing an invasion that they worry will not stop at Ukraine’s borders.</p> <p>“If Russia doesn’t invade Ukraine, then we will be relieved that Russia changed course and proved our predictions wrong,” Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken said at the United Nations Security Council on Thursday morning, in a speech that Mr. Biden had asked him to give only hours before. “That would be a far better outcome than the course we are currently on. And we will gladly accept any criticism that anyone directs at us.”</p> <p>“I am here today not to start a war, but to prevent one,” he declared, an oblique reference to Colin L. Powell’s famous but false case, also made to the United Nations, about why the United States and its allies had to disarm Saddam Hussein.</p> <p>Mr. Biden and Mr. Blinken make no secret of their suspicion that their increasingly desperate-sounding, last-ditch efforts to deter calamity will likely fail. Their pessimism was reinforced Thursday by a series of escalations. Russian-backed forces in the Donbas region appeared responsible for shelling a school, and later claimed they had come under fire from Ukrainian forces, exactly the kind of incident Mr. Blinken warned might be used as a pretext to justify an invasion.</p> <p>Mr. Biden will hold a phone call Friday afternoon with trans-Atlantic leaders about Russia’s buildup of military troops on the border of Ukraine and continued efforts to pursue deterrence and diplomacy.</p>

Russia acknowledged on Thursday having expelled the No. 2 diplomat in the American embassy in Moscow, and sent Washington a contradictory-sounding note in which it mocked the claims that it was planning to invade. It said no such action was being planned, and then warned that it would use “measures of a “military-technical character” if the West did not meet its security demands with “legally binding guarantees.” (It is not entirely clear what “military-technical” means to Mr. Putin, but officials in Washington speculate it could encompass everything from cyberweapons to relocating nuclear weapons closer to Western Europe or the United States.)

While Mr. Biden insisted that “every indication we have is they’re prepared to go into Ukraine,” a growing number of diplomats and leaders pouring into Munich for an annual security conference said they thought the best they could hope for was no invasion — but a long siege of Ukraine. Under that scenario, Mr. Putin might do everything short of sending his troops over the border — cyberattacks, assassinations, coup plots, cutting off trade — in hopes of toppling the government without triggering sanctions.

“My sense is that he will avoid an overt cross of the border with Russian troops and will aim for options short of that,” Douglas Lute, a former deputy national security adviser and former U.S. ambassador to NATO, said Thursday.

“He enjoys this position,” Mr. Lute said. “Everyone’s paying attention to him, like they haven’t in years. And he feels in control.”

That is all taking place on the surface. Behind the scenes, Mr. Biden’s aides are searching Mr. Putin’s comments for evidence that he is sensing that he may have overplayed his hand — that his massing of troops has managed to unify the normally fractious 30 nations that make up the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

Mr. Putin has reinvigorated an alliance that spent years confused about its purpose once it lost the adversary it was formed to contain, the Soviet Union. Now, containment is back. And European allies have largely, if reluctantly, lined up behind a sanctions plan that would cut off technology to Russian industry and separate its top banks from the world financial markets.

While the Russian leader has worked hard to insulate his economy from the shock of sanctions — the government has a large war chest and little debt — Mr. Putin may well be looking for fissures to exploit without risking his economy.

Mr. Biden continued on Thursday to take advantage of the fact that this is the first major geopolitical crisis to play out in a world of open-source intelligence — making it easier to call out Russian deceptions.

Americans do not need the spy-plane photographs that John F. Kennedy showed them in 1962, when he exposed the Soviet missile buildup in Cuba as a way to force Russia’s leader, Nikita S. Khrushchev, into a secret deal.

In this case, some of the best evidence is in the unclassified world. On television, news websites and Twitter, satellite photographs from private firms like Maxar help settle the debate about whether Mr. Putin is really sending some forces into retreat or whether, as the Americans claim, he is adding to the more than 150,000 troops that Mr. Biden said were massing on the border, along with tanks and a fearsome array of missiles.

So there is no real debate about what is happening on Ukraine’s borders. The firepower is there to see, and that is part of Mr. Putin’s coercion strategy. The only remaining mystery is what Mr. Putin plans to do with them. At first, U.S. officials thought he planned to use them to intimidate Ukraine’s government, force it to abandon its ambitions to join NATO at some undetermined time in the future, and stop its drift toward the West.

Then, after Mr. Putin issued a proposed “treaty” in December, it seemed he had a bigger plan: to evict the United States and NATO forces from former Soviet bloc nations that have joined NATO, and roll back the

world order created after the Soviet collapse 31 years ago. Two weeks ago, the American assessment changed again: Mr. Putin, intelligence and military officials said, was aiming at Kyiv, the capital of Ukraine, after concluding that cyberattacks and subversion alone were unlikely to displace the government. Only a full-scale invasion would do that.

So the Biden administration is trying to test Mr. Putin's bottom line. If the issue can be resolved by negotiating a new arms control pact that addresses Mr. Putin's concerns about two antimissile emplacements in Poland and Romania, or rules around military exercises held by Russia and NATO, then there is room for deal making, the two men have said. And they have said there is room to renegotiate the Minsk agreement, a set of commitments made by Ukraine and Russia after the annexation of Crimea. Those have been selectively ignored, on both sides.

But it seems unlikely to longtime American officials and many of the European diplomats filtering into Munich that Mr. Putin has gone to all this expense and all this effort, and put his legacy on the line, just to paint inside the lines of the existing order. He wants to upturn it.

Since Mr. Putin came to power 20 years ago, "Russia has been challenging that system," Angela Stent, a Brookings Institution scholar and the former national intelligence officer for Russia and Eurasia, wrote recently in Foreign Affairs. "The current crisis is ultimately about Russia redrawing the post-Cold War map and seeking to reassert its influence over half of Europe, based on the claim that it is guaranteeing its own security."

That does not mean there is no way out.

In the Cuban missile crisis, the closest the world came to nuclear annihilation during the Cold War, Mr. Khrushchev ultimately took his missiles home, in return for a secret promise — which Mr. Kennedy delivered on months later — to take American Jupiter missiles out of Turkey, where their nuclear warheads were in easy range of the Soviet Union.

It is a historical example that has lingered in the background of Situation Room debates about how to negotiate with Mr. Putin, according to two participants, who described the debates on the condition of anonymity. When Mr. Blinken offered in his speech on Thursday to meet his Russian counterpart in Europe next week, and ultimately to put together "a summit of key leaders, in the context of de-escalation, to reach understandings on our mutual security concerns," it was part of the search for a modern-day analogue.

Mr. Biden is no stranger to such trade-offs. He is perhaps the last politician still serving in Washington who played a key role in the debates over how to resolve disputes over long-forgotten arms control treaties with the Soviets, called SALT I and SALT II. He has already noted, at a news conference in January, that Ukraine won't be accepted into NATO for a long while, a signal to Moscow that there was room to deal.

And there may be. But by next week, one senior administration official said late Thursday, it may be too late.

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HEADLINE	02/17 Tense fighting; diplomatic scramble
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/18/world/ukraine-russia-news#tense-fighting-in-ukraine-sets-off-a-diplomatic-scramble
GIST	<p>As fears of a Russian invasion of Ukraine mount, President Biden is set to speak with global allies on Friday afternoon about Moscow's buildup of military troops, in a continued effort to deter any hostile advances on its neighbor.</p> <p>While the American leader has said "there is a path" to a diplomatic resolution, Mr. Biden has also warned that President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia could launch an invasion within several days.</p>

Washington and Moscow have been trading conflicting accounts over whether Russian forces are really pulling back from the Ukrainian border, with Russia insisting that it has no plans to invade and dismissing the American warnings as “information terrorism.” A heated exchange of artillery fire on Thursday between Russian-backed separatists and Ukrainian government forces, the most intense in months, amplified the tensions.

The separatists claimed on Thursday that they had come under fire from Ukrainians, the type of fighting that Western officials have warned Moscow might try to use to justify military action. The Ukrainian military said that shelling at a kindergarten had wounded three adult civilians.

The fighting set off another diplomatic scramble. A White House official said that Mr. Biden would host a phone call with trans-Atlantic leaders in “continued efforts to pursue deterrence and diplomacy.” It is unclear who will join.

Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken on Thursday made an unscheduled trip to New York, where he told the United Nations Security Council that Moscow appeared to be setting the stage for an attack. Mr. Blinken also accepted a proposal to meet with Russia’s foreign minister, Sergey V. Lavrov, late next week.

A State Department spokesman, Ned Price, did not provide a time or place for the meeting, the diplomats’ second in two months, except to say that it would not happen if Russia attacked Ukraine. “If they do invade in the coming days, it will make clear they were never serious about diplomacy,” Mr. Price said in a statement.

The Kremlin’s spokesman, Dmitri S. Peskov, also offered an ominous assessment on Thursday. “The excessive concentration of Ukrainian forces near the contact line, together with possible provocations, can pose terrible danger,” he said.

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HEADLINE	02/17 Philanthropies’ \$10M Seattle homeless plan
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/homeless/amazon-starbucks-microsoft-leaders-will-give-more-than-10-million-to-address-homelessness-in-downtown-seattle/
GIST	<p>Amazon, Starbucks, Microsoft Philanthropies, billionaires Steve and Connie Ballmer, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and a host of other corporations and philanthropists announced Thursday they intend to spend more than \$10 million in an effort to dramatically decrease homelessness downtown and in the Chinatown International District.</p> <p>Their investment will help set up and fund a team from the new King County Regional Homelessness Authority, designed to triage and alleviate homeless camping from Belltown to Little Saigon.</p> <p>While many of these corporations have previously invested money toward addressing homelessness, they usually stick to programs that focus on children and families. It’s rare to see them put a large investment into mitigating the kind of chronic homelessness that, while it’s only a portion of the overall homeless population, dominates public discourse.</p> <p>Philanthropic leaders are expected to hold a news conference Thursday to announce the funding, joined by Seattle Mayor Bruce Harrell, King County Executive Dow Constantine and Marc Dones, CEO of the King County Regional Homelessness Authority.</p> <p>Dones and the authority will be charged with implementing the philanthropies’ plan for the money, which entails a central command table with representatives from the authority, city and county governments that will meet every day and focus on housing and responding to homelessness downtown. Much of the money will help hire formerly homeless “peer navigators” who will meet with and develop plans for each person living homeless downtown. The initiative will also provide flexible funding to get them whatever they need to get housed.</p>

It's a daunting task: Many of the city's shelters for single men are downtown, as well as the jail, and Harborview Medical Center with its psychiatric emergency room is right up the hill. This creates a constant churn of medically fragile people and people with mental illnesses, who often use substances and have criminal records that make them hard to house.

"It's not a small body of work to just dig ourselves out of the situation that all of the previous decisions have gotten us to," Dones said. "This is not a small thing we are going to bite off, and I will commit to communicating at least monthly about what's going on."

Dones said the goal is to get to fewer than 30 people living outside in downtown Seattle — down from the 800-1,000 the authority estimates live there now. They hope that success can be replicated in other parts of the city and county, including in a few cities that will be announced soon.

Businesses and local leaders have been clamoring for months about a solution to chronic homelessness downtown, as tourists and employees gradually return.

"Time is a-wasting," said former Washington Gov. Christine Gregoire, who reached out to many of these organizations to ask them to donate. "We are in a crisis, in my mind and in Marc [Dones'] mind, so therefore we had to get money."

Steve and Connie Ballmer gave the majority of the gift; Amazon did not disclose the specific amount of its donation, and Microsoft could not be reached for comment. Starbucks is contributing \$150,000 to the initiative.

This kind of gift hasn't happened in the past from these big-name donors because there hasn't been one coordinated agency where philanthropies could direct their money, according to Felicia Salcedo, executive director of We Are In, a regional clearinghouse for private dollars around homelessness. Salcedo also worked at the former coordinating body on county homelessness, All Home, which was smaller compared to the regional authority and didn't have as much budgetary power.

"Funders could call the city and hear one strategy, call the county and hear another, and call All Home and hear a third," Salcedo said.

In this partnership, the private sector is providing funding that public systems can't always easily access, said Alice Shobe, the global director of Amazon in the Community, the company's corporate philanthropy arm. Then, the public systems "do the pieces that they do best," like investing in affordable housing units and new shelters.

"One thing we feel strongly about is to address a crisis as urgent as homelessness, you need to really be going on all fronts," Shobe said.

The plan

The investment will pay for a team of 30 "peer navigators," caseworkers who have been homeless and will focus on getting small groups of homeless people from the street to housing. Right now, Seattle's method of clearing encampments largely relies on one organization to get someone off the street, another to shelter them, and sometimes a third to house them long term — and the data around success is incredibly poor, with most people leaving shelters to untracked destinations. The goal of these navigators is to stay with people every step of the way.

"They are the glue. They are what make this go," Dones said.

Heidi Wiersma, the authority's new director of special projects, will oversee the effort. Wiersma previously worked for the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority.

One of the problems with the current system is that if someone doesn't want to go to a shelter because it doesn't fit their needs — pets or partners aren't allowed, for instance — they simply leave and often stay on the street, Salcedo said. But a peer navigator can be responsible for them once they walk out the door, and connect them with the right shelter or use the plan's funding to get them inside short term.

Dones and the architects of this plan are pinning their hopes on about 2,000 units of permanent supportive housing being built around the county — rooms with no exit dates and with clinical staff in the building, designed for poor people with serious behavioral health and/or medical needs. They hope to open the rooms this year and next.

But an ongoing concrete workers strike has thrown the timeline of those units into question, Seattle Deputy Mayor Tiffany Washington said, and opening new shelter spaces is proving harder than expected because of a nonprofit labor shortage attributed to low pay.

The downtown plan isn't new: Dones originally proposed it to the Seattle City Council last year during budgeting, and the council contributed \$5 million for a "high-acuity" shelter that would be triple-staffed and focused on people with the most mental health needs. But the council didn't fund the peer navigators, and instead encouraged Dones to incorporate more input from the outreach organizations that are already doing this work. But Dones moved forward with the original plan to hire the navigators, who will be authority employees. Dones says it's informed by models around the country and expertise from people who've been homeless.

"My job is to listen to people with lived experience, who were clear from day one that they wanted peer navigators," Dones said. "And so that's what we're going to get."

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HEADLINE	02/17 Adults need 4 th dose? Officials: not sure
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/17/us/fourth-dose-covid-vaccine.html
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON — Although new federal data suggests that the effectiveness of booster shots wanes after about four months, the Biden administration is not planning to recommend fourth doses of the coronavirus vaccine anytime soon.</p> <p>"We simply don't have enough data to know that it's a good thing to do," Dr. Peter Marks, who heads the division of the Food and Drug Administration that regulates vaccines, said in an interview this week.</p> <p>In a separate interview, Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, the chief medical adviser to the White House, said the vaccines are still a firm bulwark against severe illness, despite data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention showing that booster shots lose some of their potency after four to five months.</p> <p>The C.D.C.'s research, released last Friday, analyzed hospitalizations and visits to emergency rooms and urgent care clinics in 10 states by people who had had booster shots of either Moderna's or Pfizer-BioNTech's vaccine. The study showed the level of protection against hospitalization fell from 91 percent in the two months after a third shot to 78 percent after four to five months. Effectiveness against visits to emergency rooms or urgent care clinics declined from 87 percent to 66 percent.</p> <p>The data came with major caveats: Researchers did not examine variations by age group, underlying medical conditions or the presence of immune deficiencies. Still, they said, the findings underscored the possible importance of a fourth shot.</p> <p>"Should I get a fourth shot?" That's what a lot of people are asking me," Dr. Fauci said. "The answer is if you look at where we are now, it looks like it's good protection. Seventy-eight percent is good."</p>

The administration's vaccine strategy has been under constant review since President Biden took office. What comes next, Dr. Fauci said, will depend on whether protection from boosters holds steady or continues to drop after four to five months — and if it keeps dropping, how steeply.

"It's not only the number, it's the inflection of the curve," he said.

That means more uncertainty for Americans exhausted by frequent changes in vaccine recommendations — pivots largely forced by the onset of new variants. Dr. Sterling Ransone, president of the American Academy of Family Physicians, said his patients keep asking about whether a fourth shot will be necessary and if so, when.

"It's frustrating, right?" said Dr. Ransone, who practices in the small town of Deltaville, Va. "We humans want some certainty and control of the situation. And this is a case where we don't know what's going to happen in the future. We don't know the exact recommendation."

In Bangor, Maine, Dr. James W. Jarvis, who leads Covid response for Northern Light Health, a local health care system, said that he stresses to his patients how well the vaccines are working, even if boosters are needed. Although they don't offer complete protection, he said, "the most recent data really suggests that these vaccines are still doing a good job."

Data from Britain is similar to that from the C.D.C., indicating that boosters are about 75 percent to 85 percent effective against hospitalization four to six months after they are given. Israel has also noted waning of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine's effectiveness in the months after a booster shot, according to the C.D.C.

Israel began offering a fourth shot in late December, but only to health care workers. The C.D.C. has recommended that those with immune deficiencies get three shots as part of their initial series, followed by a fourth shot as a booster.

Biden administration officials say two-thirds of eligible adults have gotten a booster shot since the additional injections were authorized in November. Uptake has been slower among children over 12, [who only became eligible in early January](#).

Dr. Marks said it may turn out that the best time for an additional shot is this fall, when the spread of the coronavirus is expected to pick up again. "Barring any surprises from new variants, maybe the best thing is to think about our booster strategy in conjunction with the influenza vaccine next fall, and get as many people as possible boosted then," he said.

Dr. Ransone said some of his patients would prefer that, so they can get their immunizations in a single visit.

At a session hosted last month by the [F.D.A. and the University of California, San Francisco](#), Dr. Marks said he hoped that a third shot would be enough of a shield against disease that only a yearly Covid booster would be needed. But both he and Dr. Fauci said it is impossible to make any prediction without more data.

[Earlier this month, Dr. Fauci suggested](#) that any recommendation would likely be aimed at those most at risk, possibly based on age as well as underlying conditions.

"I don't think you're going to be hearing, if you do, any kind of recommendations that would be across the board for everyone," he said at a White House briefing. "It very likely will take into account what subset of people have a diminished, or not, protection against the important parameters such as hospitalization."

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SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/covid-virus-may-be-airborne-longer-and-spread-by-ventilation-shows-tri-cities-research/
GIST	<p>Scientists at Pacific Northwest National Laboratory in Richland have found an unexpected way that the coronavirus that causes COVID-19 may be infecting people.</p> <p>A new study investigated one way that the virus may remain viable in the air more than 200 feet away from an infected person and after the infected person has left the room.</p> <p>Conclusions are not definitive, but they do raise the possibility that changes should be considered in how buildings are ventilated to prevent the airborne spread of the virus that caused COVID-19.</p> <p>“There are reports of people becoming infected with a coronavirus downwind of an infected person or in a room several minutes after an infected person has exited that room,” said Leonard Pease, the corresponding author of a PNNL study published in the February issue of the journal International Communications in Heat and Mass Transfer.</p> <p>Mucus may be to blame, according to PNNL.</p> <p>As early as the 1930s research has shown that some contaminated respiratory droplets are so large and heavy that they fall to the ground after a cough or sneeze, posing little risk of being breathed in by another person.</p> <p>Others are so small and light that they dry out almost immediately, rendering them no longer infectious.</p> <p>But a study done with computer modeling at PNNL in Eastern Washington shows that the mucus that coats respiratory droplets that people spew from their lungs may help keep viral particles within the droplets damp and infectious for longer than previously understood.</p> <p>“Perhaps infections respiratory droplets persist longer than we have realized,” Pease said.</p> <p>The team estimated that droplets encased in mucus could remain damp for up to 30 minutes and travel up to 200 feet in the air.</p> <p>The possibility has implications for how ventilation in buildings may be used to either protect people from infection with the coronavirus or inadvertently increase the chances they could be infected.</p> <p>Researchers studied how the coronavirus might spread through the air by using artificial, virus-like particles encased in two substances to stand in for human mucus — cow mucus and a compound derived from brown seaweed that is used as a thickening agent in ice cream.</p> <p>The particles were released with an airbrush to simulate a person coughing for one minute and then tracked from room to room using ultraviolet light.</p> <p>They found that increasing ventilation quickly reduced the airborne particles in the room where they were released. But levels then spiked in adjoining rooms.</p> <p>“If you are in a downstream room and you’re not the source of the virus, you probably are not better off with more ventilation,” Pease said.</p> <p>But in some situations ventilation still could help prevent infections.</p> <p>Increasing the air exchange where crowds gather — such as at school assemblies — can help reduce contaminated particles.</p> <p>But for normal work and school conditions, it can spread contamination throughout all rooms of the building, researchers concluded.</p>

HEADLINE	02/17 What changes in WA, King Co. mandates
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/health/whats-changing-about-mask-and-covid-vaccine-requirements-in-wa-and-king-county/
GIST	<p>Rules for masks are winding down in Washington state. But if you live in Seattle or King County, don't be so quick to toss your mask.</p> <p>Starting March 21, the statewide mask requirement will lift for most indoor spaces including schools, grocery stores, bars and gyms, Gov. Jay Inslee announced Thursday.</p> <p>However, King County won't be lifting its mask mandate for indoor settings and large outdoor events just yet, according to Public Health — Seattle & King County spokesperson Kate Cole. The agency, she said, will continue to monitor coronavirus-related metrics and reassess the mandate in the “coming weeks.”</p> <p>Gov. Jay Inslee announced Thursday masks still will be required in some settings, and vaccine-verification requirements also will loosen both statewide and in King County.</p> <p>The changes come as coronavirus cases and hospitalizations fueled by omicron are declining, and as school-district superintendents have called on leaders to loosen mask requirements for schools — a measure other states have taken recently.</p> <p>Local governments still have the authority to continue or reimplement mask mandates, and private businesses can still require employees and customers to wear masks, according to Inslee's office.</p> <p>While more updated guidance is expected in the coming weeks from the state Department of Health, here's the latest mask and vaccine verification policies in King County and Washington state.</p> <p>Where are masks still required?</p> <p>Masks will still required statewide on public transit and health care and congregate living spaces. That includes medical facilities like hospitals, pharmacies, outpatient and dental facilities, long-term care settings, correctional facilities, taxis and rideshare vehicles.</p> <p>Masks also will still be required on school buses — a federal requirement, according to Inslee's office. In King County, masks will still be required in nearly all indoor spaces open to the public including gyms, stadiums, grocery stores, exercise facilities and retail establishments.</p> <p>Where are masks not required?</p> <p>Starting March 21, there will no longer be a statewide mask mandate for most indoor spaces, which include schools, child care facilities, libraries, restaurants and bars, places of worship, gyms, recreation centers, indoor athletic facilities, or retail establishments like grocery stores.</p> <p>The statewide outdoor mask requirement for gatherings of over 500 people ends even earlier, on Friday. If you live in Seattle or King County, not much is changing — yet.</p> <p>“If cases and hospitalizations continue to fall and our hospitals recover and stabilize, as we all hope they will, it is reasonable that we will be at a place to lift the local indoor mask mandate.” Cole said. “But we are not there yet.”</p> <p>What about vaccine verification?</p> <p>Starting March 1, vaccine verification for large events will no longer be required statewide. King County also will drop its vaccine-verification requirement for large outdoor events, like concerts and sporting events, and restaurants, bars, theaters and gyms on March 1.</p>

Businesses will be free to impose their own vaccine requirements if they choose, but there will be no countywide requirement.

How will guidelines for school change?

DOH will issue an updated guidance for K-12 schools in early March, which will go into effect March 21. Existing requirements for distancing, ventilation and sanitation will become recommendations, according to DOH.

Until then, the current school health and safety requirements are still in effect — including masks.

Schools still will be required to report coronavirus cases and outbreaks and cooperate with public health authorities. Students and staff with COVID-19 symptoms still will be required to quarantine and schools must ensure access to testing for staff and students, who have been exposed or may have symptoms.

Those who test positive still will be required to stay home and follow the federal Center for Disease Control and Prevention and DOH's isolation protocol.

Will guidelines for employers change?

Employers still will be required to tell workers when there is a suspected or confirmed coronavirus case. For worksites with 50 or more employees, outbreaks with 10 or more confirmed cases must be reported to the state Department of Labor and Industries.

Employees also must allow workers to continue wearing masks if they choose and cannot take “adverse action” against a worker who wears a mask or takes time off to get vaccinated or seek coronavirus-related treatment.

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HEADLINE	02/17 SEA workers weathered a ‘perfect storm’
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/life/travel/sea-tac-airport-employees-weathered-a-perfect-storm-this-winter/
GIST	<p>Take a pandemic with a new, uber-contagious variant surging, throw in pounding snowstorms over the winter holidays, and top it off with a bureaucratic snarl of 5G rollout regulations: That’s a recipe for chaos at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport.</p> <p>These stresses take their toll on travelers and travel-industry staff alike. Travelers, when stuck or delayed, feel helpless, with nothing to do but plead and vent with the nearest staff person. For airport-industry workers, there’s nothing worse than having to honestly answer, “There’s nothing more I can do.”</p> <p>While 2022 is forecast to be another rebound year for travel, it will also be a highly volatile, unpredictable one. Looking behind the scenes at what was happening for Sea-Tac staff this winter may help travelers anticipate and cope with potential future disruptions.</p> <p>Despite the headaches this winter, there were silver linings. Lisa Davis-Edeal, flight attendant for Horizon Air and president of Horizon’s chapter of the Association of Flight Attendants union, recalls an all-hands-on-deck response as airport workers of every stripe attempted to accommodate thousands of frustrated passengers.</p> <p>Many hands make a lighter load when everything falls apart at once.</p> <p>“Everything that can go wrong, did go wrong, over a period of about two and a half weeks,” said Terry Taylor, a flight attendant for Alaska Airlines for 49 years and Council 18 president for the Association of Flight Attendants-CWA. “It was a perfect storm.”</p> <p>Omicron impacts</p> <p>Heading into the holiday season, staffing levels across sectors at the airport were already low, despite hiring campaigns to recoup staff lost in the first year-plus of the pandemic.</p>

The omicron variant, [first confirmed in Washington in early December](#), began to spread among team members in waves. Fortunately, home tests and vaccines were more available than earlier in the pandemic, which sped up the return to work — as did the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's shorter, five-day quarantine](#) recommendation — but healthy folks often had to take and are still taking double shifts or doing the work of several people, multiple sources said.

Pilots and flight crews need extra consideration — because their flight time is [prescribed by Federal Aviation Administration regulations](#), if they take on extra shifts, they must stop working sooner, when they “time out.” Flight delays compound this, too.

Anticipating the holiday rush (and looking ahead), the Port of Seattle worked to streamline the travel experience by asking travelers to arrive early, take alternate transportation, pre-book security clearance and order food ahead. “Please pack your patience and arrive early,” it tweeted. You can find a list of tips at [the Port of Seattle's website](#).

Sleeping in the airport

Then came the snowstorms, a one-two punch of extended storms and temperatures plunging to 17 degrees. The [first storm hit Dec. 26](#), dropping heavy snow across Puget Sound, and canceling 419 Sea-Tac flights, followed by 312 that Monday, according to Perry Cooper, spokesperson for Port of Seattle.

“Between Dec. 16 and Jan. 2, we had over 2,000 flights canceled, which represents about 12% [of the airport's total scheduled flights],” Cooper said.

As a city, Seattle is not known for its snow-readiness — with too few plows and other equipment, even a few inches can shut down the city. As a result, omicron-stretched staffing was compromised further when road conditions snowed workers in at home.

Administrators and supervisors went the extra mile to fill up their schedules — literally.

Tony Lomae — who, like many airport employees, works two jobs, including as a lavatory technician — said his manager was personally driving staff to work during the snowstorms. Alaska flight attendants were offered special incentive pay that was double-time level or better.

“Everyone was there to pick up the pieces, no matter who it was: management or union representatives,” said Davis-Edeal, the Horizon Air flight attendant and union chapter president. “Management was out shoveling snow, getting meals in, manning telephone lines trying to find hotel rooms — everyone did the best they could.”

“It was very busy [during the snow]. I've never seen it like that before,” said Ali Omisaye, who also works two jobs at the airport: as a wheelchair agent and as a supervisor driving golf carts from the terminal to the light-rail station.

“I worked at MSP airport in Minnesota. They're not prepared in Seattle,” Omisaye said. “A lot of employees call in sick because of the snow emergency.” Omisaye was able to drive from West Seattle to do double shifts. The company he works for offered to put him up in a hotel, but he preferred to get home to his family.

Flight cancellations rippled out into further delays, staffing and supply shortages. Staffers redoubled their efforts to reschedule flights, de-ice runways and planes, clean and stock the restaurants and bathrooms — but it was hard to keep pace with the hurdles.

Passengers, whether bumped from a Seattle flight or rerouted from Portland or another snowed-in airport, flooded Seattle's terminal. When the hotels filled up, people slept in places like the baggage claim area — for as long as it took.

Lomae saw many people stranded, but one woman stood out to him. “I saw her trying to ask about getting a [hotel] room,” he said. “I was feeling sorry about her. She’d been there for three days. She didn’t even have a phone ... I wished she could not only take a rest, but take a shower and be comfortable.”

Sadia Bultum, a janitor since 2015, said during this time she and her co-workers “had to pull trash every 15 minutes” and clean bathrooms more often than usual. “Since we already had short staff, when people called in sick we don’t always have backup coverage,” she said. The mood of the staff was “unhappy, and tired,” she said.

“There were more cranky people because more people’s plans and lives had been disrupted and of course that’s understandable,” Taylor said. “I believe there were many people who tried to leave Seattle multiple times.”

One reason for this? “Some of our crew members were not returned timely enough to get to their next flight. It was sort of a cascading situation,” said Taylor, who represents approximately 2,500 Alaska flight attendants as the local union’s council president.

“We feel terrible when that happens. People have planned vacations, a limited amount of time, meetings or time spent with family over the holidays — nobody likes it when things go sideways,” Taylor said.

Port of Seattle data records highlight the pressure on the airport and its staff.

From Dec. 26 to Jan. 1, the Transportation and Security Administration screened 38,800 passengers at Sea-Tac; there were just 700 airplane departures and arrivals.

A comparable week in 2021, with 38,200 screened passengers, notched 1,160 takeoffs and landings; that is, 460 more flights to transport 600 fewer passengers.

That aircraft operations figure of 700 is the lowest since June 2020.

During the snowstorms, Port of Seattle workers moved 600,000 cubic feet of snow and handed out more than 3,000 blankets to people stuck at the airport, Cooper said.

Tensions remained high among passengers left frustrated waiting for answers. One customer was told the [wait time to reach an Alaska agent on the phone would be over 21 hours](#). Despite “working around the clock” to respond to customers, “the number of guests impacted far surpasses our ability to handle them in as quick and timely manner as we would like,” Seattle-based [Alaska Airlines spokesperson Bobbie Egan told The Seattle Times](#) in December. “It is not our finest moment and we feel terrible about the situation.”

Complicating matters at Horizon, Davis-Edeal explained: Many staffers were new hires who may not have been familiar with protocols.

A foggy rollout

The final wave came in January, when foggy conditions rolled in at the same time 5G was being rolled out. The FAA had just determined that the new higher frequencies used by cellphone carriers can interfere with altimeters — a part of the airplane’s navigation equipment that uses a very similar frequency. If that happens, the FAA says, it could prevent “engine and braking systems from transitioning to landing mode, which could prevent an aircraft from stopping on the runway.”

The combination is potentially deadly at low elevations with poor visibility, such as in fog. The FAA clears each aircraft to fly or land in 5G conditions based on how well its specific equipment can handle those conditions. The approval process grounded numerous planes, throwing flight schedules nationwide into chaos. Foggy weather benched or rerouted more planes.

Larger planes were prioritized for clearance, said Davis-Edeal, which left [regional airlines using smaller planes grounded](#). Horizon Air had 67 flights canceled in one day, she said. The smallest disruption has a big impact. “We’re extremely lean in the regional side, so if something extreme happens to us, it’s a big problem,” she said.

“We had a flight attendant — she was stuck in Pasco I believe,” Davis-Edeal continued. “She’d been there for three days with her crew because of snowstorms, went back and was hit with the 5G cancellations. We heard regularly that people were without any communication.”

She explained how Paine Field in Everett shut down in the mornings and evenings, while fog cleared in the daytime — but by then, crews and aircrafts aren’t in the right places.

“You add more hours to everyone’s day, you have to find more crew and more aircrafts. And in the midst of that someone will be diagnosed with COVID, and you can’t fly without minimum crew,” Davis-Edeal said.

And that’s just the planning reconfiguration routine. On the plane, it’s a stress-endurance exercise, too.

“You’re watching for [people needing medical attention], seeing that people are not getting angry, keeping their masks on, getting water, that their basic needs are met,” Davis-Edeal said.

A five-hour flight with a generous layover can devolve into a 14-hour delay with no sleep. As staff “time out” due to regulations, they are replaced, interrupting workflow and team dynamics.

“One FA reached out to us and had five separate crew changes in one day. For good crew-resource management, you want to keep the team together,” Davis-Edeal added. “You do debriefing before each leg, and you have to get to know each person as they come on.”

Since then, almost all Sea-Tac planes have been cleared for 5G flying. By Jan. 18, [the FAA announced](#) that roughly 62% of the commercial planes flown in the U.S. were cleared for flying in low visibility, including the Boeing 737 MAX; by Jan. 27, that figure reached 90%.

Looking ahead

Port of Seattle has several initiatives to support workers and passengers for travel in 2022. For workers, it has promoted job opportunities, handed out 2 million masks, hosted a pop-up vaccine clinic for airport workers, and campaigned for minimum wage requirements. For passengers, it will launch FlyWell, a campaign encouraging stress relief and management while traveling at the airport.

Taylor said Alaska is ramping up for a hiring campaign that should bring staff numbers past pre-COVID-19 levels.

Saba Belachew, a lead wheelchair agent, works at the airport three days a week. She finds working with the public on the pandemic front lines daunting, but worth it.

“To be honest, it’s a really scary time. You’ll never be free like before. But still, we have to do what we have to do,” she said. “Personally, I love to help people by any means. When I help someone who really needs help, I am so happy.”

Like everyone else these days, many Sea-Tac workers look forward to a return to normal.

“Things have slowed down a little bit,” Lomae, the lavatory technician, said with relief regarding where things stand now as he headed out for another shift. “I hope everything will be great next year compared to this winter,” he said.

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SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/entertainment/events/commemorate-executive-order-9066-with-these-seattle-area-events/
GIST	<p>What's Happening</p> <p>On Feb. 19, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, authorizing the creation of military zones to incarcerate nearly all 120,000 Japanese Americans living domestically during World War II.</p> <p>“In the Japanese American community, it’s a really fundamental memorial. While I don’t think the incarceration defines us, I think it certainly was a huge impactful traumatic experience,” said Erin Shigaki, a community activist and member of the Minidoka Pilgrimage Planning Committee.</p> <p>This Feb. 19 marks the 80th anniversary since the signing of Order 9066, and “not only are we losing our survivors of this experience, but we know that the trauma from it has carried down into all of us. ... I think that a lot of [Japanese Americans] really feel like we have a moral imperative to stand up in the way that was missing in the '40s,” Shigaki said.</p> <p>In the Seattle area, most Japanese Americans spent their first few months incarcerated at Puyallup Assembly Center on the Washington State Fairgrounds (aka Camp Harmony) before their transfer to concentration camps in Idaho and California. This year, Minidoka Pilgrimage’s Remember and Resist commemoration event will begin on this site.</p> <p>Remember and Resist is meant to be a celebration of healing, Shigaki said. “We’ll have some blessings, we’ll have an opportunity for people to participate by writing names of loved ones who went through this experience on mementos, we’ll have some taiko, which we feel is powerful medicine.”</p> <p>Event participants will then travel to the Northwest Detention Center in Tacoma, a site that community members have been working to shut down because of the similarities between those currently incarcerated at the private prison and the Japanese Americans placed in concentration camps last century, Shigaki said.</p> <p>“The health care has been bad, there have been numerous outbreaks, the food has been extremely poor quality. And we just think it’s really important to be the kinds of friends and allies that were largely missing during World War II times,” she said.</p> <p>The gathering at the Northwest Detention Center will include chanting and drumming, “which we think is really vital because we know that the folks inside can hear it,” as well as a connection to someone incarcerated inside via cellphone, Shigaki said.</p> <p>“It’s a very grim anniversary. What we want to bring to this program is not only the seriousness of the date but the vitality and the resilience of our community, and that’s why we’re infusing it with art and blessing and music and solidarity — to really balance out the fullness of our community story,” Shigaki said.</p> <p>Remember and Resist will take place 10 a.m.-1 p.m. Feb. 19; it begins at the Washington State Fairgrounds (Blue Lot Parking, 311 10th Ave. S.E., Puyallup) and will move to the Northwest Detention Center (1623 E. J St., Tacoma) at 11 a.m. for a continuation of the program at noon. Masks and social distancing are required. Find more information at: st.news/9066</p> <p>Executive Order 9066 commemoration events</p> <p>Here are some other events observing the anniversary of Order 9066 in the Puget Sound area.</p> <p>Remembrance: The Legacy of Executive Order 9066 in Washington State — Ongoing</p> <p>In this permanent gallery at Washington State History Museum, find photographs, art, letters and more sourced by working with individuals and families who were directly impacted by Order 9066, including survivors and their descendants. Purchase tickets online; prices vary. 1911 Pacific Ave., Tacoma; 888-238-4373; washingtonhistory.org</p> <p>Executive Order 9066 After 80 Years: Where are We Now? — Feb. 17</p>

Seattle Central College hosts an online Day of Remembrance event featuring [Frank Abe, author of “We Hereby Refuse,”](#) and Erin Shigaki, a community artist and activist, noon-1:30 p.m. Register [online](#); free. seattlecentral.edu

Annual Day of Remembrance at the Washington State Legislature — Feb. 18

Join the Washington State Legislature for a virtual Day of Remembrance observance 12:30-2 p.m. This annual ceremony will commence on the Senate floor and will continue to the House of Representatives at 1:30 p.m. Streaming [online](#); free. twv.org

Executive Order 9066 — Feb. 18

The Japanese Cultural and Community Center of Washington hosts a panel with community members Ats Kiuchi, Eileen Yamada Lamphere and Karen Yoshitomi 7-8 p.m. During the hour, viewers will listen to community member's roles in the Japanese American community and their experiences with the lasting effects of Order 9066. RSVP [online](#) by 5 p.m. Feb. 17; free. jcccw.org

Bainbridge Island Japanese American Exclusion Memorial at Pritchard Park Volunteer Work Party — Feb. 19

Bainbridge Island Parks Foundation and Bainbridge Island Japanese American Exclusion Memorial Association co-sponsor a volunteer work day 10 a.m.-noon to refresh and replant the Exclusion Memorial grounds and surrounding park. Register [online](#); free. *4195 Eagle Harbor Drive N.E., Bainbridge Island;* 206-842-4971; biparksfoundation.org

“Emerging Radiance”: Honoring the Nikkei Farmers of Bellevue — Feb. 19

Join artist Michelle Kumata, Bellevue Arts Museum creative director Tani Ikeda and Densho founding director Tom Ikeda for a Day of Remembrance broadcast at noon. The program will highlight stories of Bellevue's Nikkei farmer community, introduce descendants of the farmers depicted in Kumata's “Emerging Radiance” mural and provide a behind-the-scenes look at the installation at the museum. RSVP [online](#); free. bellevuearts.org

Pictures of Executive Order 9066 — Feb. 19

Seattle Symphony presents “Pictures of Executive Order 9066,” a collaboration between filmmaker JJ Gerber and singer and songwriter Kishi Bashi that explores the stories of those impacted by Order 9066 in an interactive exhibit 1-7 p.m. The 10-minute self-guided multimedia experience also features oral histories supplied by Densho. Purchase tickets [online](#); \$12. *200 University St., Seattle;* 206-215-4747; seattlesymphony.org

Day of Remembrances and the Japanese American Community — Feb. 19

In this virtual panel, Frank Abe, who helped organize the first Day of Remembrance in Seattle in 1978, and other early organizers will discuss the evolution of these events at 2 p.m. Historian Brian Niiya and Japanese American Citizens League executive director David Inoue will reflect on the legacy of the Day of Remembrance and discuss its role in the Japanese American community today. Stream on [YouTube](#); free. seattlejacl.org

Memory Net Remembrance Project Unveiling — Feb. 19

Densho is launching a new community art initiative, the Memory Net Remembrance Project. In collaboration with resident artist Lauren Iida, Densho will select submissions of memory objects from the Japanese community and their ancestors during the Japanese American incarceration. Iida will select from these objects to incorporate into a 30-foot-long cut paper net to be hung as a semipermanent installation in Densho's community room. The Memory Net will be unveiled live at 3 p.m. RSVP [online](#); free. densho.org

The Lakeshore Day of Remembrance Display — Feb. 21

Join a Day of Remembrance ceremony and unveiling of The Lakeshore Display at The Lakeshore senior living facility at noon. The Lakeshore Display, in partnership with Barbara Yasui and Densho, will present residents' memorabilia from the Japanese American incarceration. *11448 Rainier Ave. S., Seattle;* eraliving.com/communities/lakeshore

HEADLINE	02/17 Home values average \$1M in Seattle metro
SOURCE	https://www.king5.com/article/money/markets/real-estate/home-prices-western-washington-seattle/281-017e9ab8-8f66-4c82-9366-1cffe449f5dc
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — A new report from real estate website Zillow gives people in western Washington a glimpse into how this is truly a “Seller’s Market”.</p> <p>Sixteen cities in the Seattle metro area have a typical home value of more than \$1 million. This is an increase from 2021 when ten area cities were on Zillow’s list.</p> <p>While home values are rising, so are home prices.</p> <p>“Last month, the median sales price in King County was \$815,000, which is up 10.3% from last year,” explained Zach McDonald, a realtor with Real Property Associates in Seattle. “If we look at the average, though, the average is quite a bit bigger. The average sales price in King County last month was \$1,078,000, which was a 17.8% jump.”</p> <p>On average, homes in King County sell 5% to 6% above asking price, McDonald said. However, taking a closer look at specific areas of the county, homes are selling for 15% to 20% above asking.</p> <p>McDonald said most homes in King County have been selling well above the asking price.</p> <p>“That’s the average, which means some are 25, 30, even 40% over asking price,” McDonald said. “Over in Redmond, Kirkland, Bellevue, you have to be prepared to be paying 200, 300, 400, 500,000 over asking price to be able to be successful in those markets.”</p> <p>Homebuyers are also competing with dozens of other people when trying to close a sale on a home.</p> <p>“There aren’t enough houses for all the buyers, and there are 20-30 buyers for every house,” said McDonald. “I think another thing that’s happening more recently is interest rates have been going up a little bit more. So, there’s this fear of missing out as well that’s starting to creep in.”</p> <p>When people consider making an offer, there are three factors McDonald recommends they consider in a negotiation.</p> <p>“You’ve got the price you’re paying, the terms in the contract and contingencies,” explained McDonald. “In the past, you could remove contingencies or make your terms more favorable to the seller, and sometimes not pay the highest price.” However, McDonald says that’s no longer the case.</p> <p>“It’s so competitive that you really have to check each box to be successful. Occasionally, you can win without having the highest price. Right now, you really need to have all three of those things in your favor to be successful. It’s that competitive.”</p>
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HEADLINE	02/17 WA lifts indoor mask mandate Mar. 21st
SOURCE	https://www.seattlepi.com/news/article/Washington-state-to-lift-indoor-mask-mandate-16927830.php
GIST	<p>OLYMPIA, Wash. (AP) — Washington’s statewide indoor mask mandate, one of the few left in the country, will lift in most places on March 21, including at schools and child care facilities, Gov. Jay Inslee said Thursday.</p> <p>And starting on March 1, vaccine verification or proof of a negative COVID-19 test will no longer be required for attendance at large events.</p>

Masks will still be required in health care settings, like hospitals and doctor's offices, and at long-term care facilities, prisons and jails. They will also still be required on public transit, taxis, ride-hail vehicles and school buses.

Private businesses and local governments that want to require masks for employees, customers or residents will still be able to do so.

Inslee said that the late March date to lift the mask mandate is based on hospital admission projections. During Thursday's news conference, he showed a chart that shows hospitalizations for COVID-19 are about 20 per 100,000 people. His goal is to get that number down to 5, which is when he said hospitals can return to more normal operations.

"To those who think maybe it should end earlier, all I can tell you is we lost 1,000 people in January to this disease," he said. "And when we make decisions, it seems to me we ought to have a recognition of how dangerous and deadly this disease still is after this period of time."

Like the rest of the country, Washington — which first imposed a statewide mask mandate in June 2020 — has seen a steady decline in both cases and hospitalizations since the height of the omicron surge last month.

Last May, the state changed its requirements to align with guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which allowed vaccinated people to go without a mask indoors, but that exception was rescinded in August 2021 after the delta variant emerged. A face covering requirement for outdoor events of 500 or more people was imposed in September, but Inslee announced last week that mandate would lift on Friday.

Also starting Friday, non-urgent procedures — which have been on hold since last month due to concerns about hospital capacity — can resume, since the governor decided to not extend the ban beyond the set four weeks.

Democratic governors in several states have already ended or set dates to end masking rules in public places or in schools. New Mexico's governor announced Thursday that the statewide mask mandate there was being lifted, effective immediately, leaving Hawaii as the only state that has not indicated when its indoor mask mandates may be rescinded.

On Wednesday, King County — where Seattle is located — announced it will no longer require COVID-19 vaccination checks to enter restaurants, bars, theaters and gyms beginning March 1.

CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky said during a White House briefing Wednesday that the government is contemplating a change to its mask guidance in the coming weeks.

Republican legislative leaders criticized the news Thursday, saying that it was time to end the mask mandate now.

"If someone wants to wear a mask in public, it should be by choice – not by mandate," Sen. John Braun and Rep. J.T. Wilcox said in a joint statement.

There have been more than 1.4 million confirmed or probable cases in the state since the start of the pandemic and 11,522 deaths.

More than 80% of the Washington population age 5 and older has received at least one dose of vaccine, and nearly 73% is fully vaccinated.

As of this week, more than 2.5 million people have either received a booster or a third dose, according to the Department of Health.

HEADLINE	02/17 American cash, Canada protest, US politics
SOURCE	https://www.seattlepi.com/news/article/US-funds-for-Canada-protests-may-sway-American-16925759.php
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON (AP) — The Canadians who have disrupted travel and trade with the U.S. and occupied downtown Ottawa for nearly three weeks have been cheered and funded by American right-wing activists and conservative politicians who also oppose vaccine mandates and the country's liberal leader.</p> <p>Yet whatever impact the protests have on Canadian society and the government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, experts say the outside support is really aimed at energizing conservative politics in the U.S. Midterm elections are looming, and some Republicans think standing with the protesters up north will galvanize fund-raising and voter turnout at home, these experts say.</p> <p>“The kind of narratives that the truckers and the trucker convoy are focusing on are going to be really important issues for the (U.S.) elections coming ahead,” said Samantha Bradshaw, a postdoctoral fellow at the Digital Civil Society Lab at Stanford University. “And so using this protest as an opportunity to galvanize their own supporters and other groups, I think it’s very much an opportunity for them.”</p> <p>Police poured into downtown Ottawa on Thursday, and work crews erected fences around Parliament, in what protesters feared was a prelude to a crackdown.</p> <p>About 44 percent of the nearly \$10 million in contributions to support the protesters originated from U.S. donors, according to an Associated Press analysis of leaked donor files. U.S. Republican elected officials, including Texas Sen. Ted Cruz and Georgia Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, have praised the protesters calling them “heroes” and “patriots.”</p> <p>Fox News host Sean Hannity told two protest organizers on his show on Wednesday that “you do have a lot of support from your friends in America. That I can tell you.” He added: “We have a movement in America that’s starting very soon.”</p> <p>Trudeau and other senior Canadian officials have been sharply critical of the financial support coming from other countries.</p> <p>“What this country is facing is a largely foreign-funded, targeted and coordinated attack on critical infrastructure and our democratic institutions,” Bill Blair, Canada’s minister of public safety and emergency preparedness, said earlier this week.</p> <p>Ian Reifowitz, professor of historical studies at the State University of New York, called the protests a “gift” for Republicans in the U.S., and he predicted they’ll use the populist appeal of the demonstrations to raise money ahead of the midterm elections in November.</p> <p>“They constantly need fresh outrages,” said Reifowitz, the author of “The Tribalization of Politics: How Rush Limbaugh’s Race-Baiting Rhetoric on the Obama Presidency Paved the Way for Trump.”</p> <p>“It’s a terrific (issue) eight or nine months before the election for them,” he said. “It allows you to bank money, bank volunteers and energize the base, which is what you want to do.”</p> <p>Demonstrators in Ottawa have been regularly supplied with fuel and food, and the area around Parliament Hill has at times resembled a spectacular carnival with bouncy castles, gyms, a playground and a concert stage with DJs.</p> <p>GiveSendGo, a website used to collect donations for the Canadian protests, has collected at least \$9.58 million dollars, including \$4.2 million, or 44%, that originated in the United States, according to a database of donor information posted online by DDoSecrets, a non-profit group.</p> <p>The Canadian government has been working to block protesters’ access to these funds, however, and it is not clear how much of the money has ultimately gotten through.</p>

Millions of dollars raised through another crowdfunding site, GoFundMe, were blocked after Canadian officials raised objections with the company, which determined that the effort violated its terms of service around unlawful activity.

The GiveSendGo database analyzed by AP showed more than 109,000 donations through Friday night to campaigns in support of the protests, with a little under 62,000 coming from the U.S.

The GiveSendGo data listed several Americans as giving thousands or tens of thousands of dollars to the protest, with the largest single donation of \$90,000 coming from a person who identified himself as Thomas M. Siebel.

Siebel, the billionaire founder of software company Siebel Systems, did not respond to messages sent to an email associated with a foundation he runs and to his LinkedIn account.

A representative from the Siebel Scholars Foundation, who signed her name only as Jennifer, did not respond to questions about whether he had donated the money. But she said Siebel has a record of supporting several causes, including efforts to “protect individual liberty.”

“These are personal initiatives and have nothing to do with the companies with which he is associated,” she wrote.

Siebel has donated hundreds of thousands of dollars to Republican candidates and organizations over the last 20 years, according to Federal Election Commission records, including a \$400,000 contribution in 2019 to a GOP fundraising committee called “Take Back the House 2020.”

The GiveSendGo Freedom Convoy campaign was created on Jan. 27 by Tamara Lich. She previously belonged to the far-right Maverick Party, which calls for western Canada to become independent.

The Canadian government moved earlier this week to cut off funding for the protesters by broadening the scope of the country’s anti-money laundering and terrorist financing rules to cover crowdfunding platforms like GiveSendGo.

“We are making these changes because we know that these platforms are being used to support illegal blockades and illegal activity, which is damaging the Canadian economy,” said Canadian Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland.

Perhaps more important than the financial support is the cheerleading the Canadian protesters have received from prominent American conservative politicians and pundits, like Hannity, who see kindred spirits in their northern neighbors opposing vaccine mandates.

On the same day Lich created the GiveSendGo campaign, retired Army Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn shared a video of the convoy in a post on the messaging app Telegram.

“These truckers are fighting back against the nonsense and tyranny, especially coming from the Canadian government,” wrote Flynn, the former head of the Defense Intelligence Agency who served briefly as former President Donald Trump’s national security adviser.

A few days later, Flynn urged people to donate to the Canadian protesters. Earlier this week, he twice posted the message “#TrudeauTheCoward” on Telegram, referring to the prime minister who leads Canada’s Liberal Party.

Fox News hosts regularly laud the protests, and Trump weighed in with a broadside at Trudeau, calling him a “far left lunatic” who has “destroyed Canada with insane COVID mandates.” Cruz called the truckers “heroes” and “patriots,” and Greene said she cannot wait to see a convoy protest in Washington.

	<p>Sen. Rand Paul, R-Ky., said he hopes truckers come to America and “clog up cities” in an interview last week with the Daily Signal, a news website of the conservative Heritage Foundation.</p> <p>Far-right and anti-vaccine activists, inspired by the Canadian actions, are now planning American versions of the protests against COVID-19 mandates and restrictions modeled on the Canadian demonstrations.</p> <p>The protests in Canada have also created a moneymaking opportunity for some, including a chain of “New England for Trump” stores, which were selling merchandise inspired by the demonstrators. A mesh-back “Freedom Convoy 2022” trucker hat goes for \$25.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/17 King Co. repeals bicycle helmet law
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/transportation/king-county-repeals-mandatory-bicycle-helmet-law/
GIST	<p>In the face of data showing enforcement has been both minimal and has disproportionately affected people of color and those experiencing homelessness, the King County Board of Health voted Thursday to repeal its decades-old mandatory helmet law for bicycle riders. The repeal goes into effect in 30 days.</p> <p>The board, made up of elected officials and medical experts from cities across the county, voiced its support for the voluntary use of helmets, passing a resolution encouraging riders to don the protective gear. But board member and King County Councilmember Joe McDermott said there are other ways of encouraging helmet use that do not rely on law enforcement, including educational campaigns and free helmet distribution. The Metropolitan King County Council recently budgeted more than \$200,000 to buy helmets and expand education.</p> <p>“Helmets save lives, full stop. But the disproportional enforcement of the requirement gives us concern” about how it affects people who are homeless and communities of color, McDermott said before the vote.</p> <p>The repeal affects most of King County, including Seattle. However, 17 cities in the county, making up roughly one-third of the county’s population, have their own laws mandating helmet use that won’t be affected by Thursday’s vote.</p> <p>Board member and King County Councilmember Jeanne Kohl-Welles was the sole vote against the repeal.</p> <p>The action came despite criticism from some in the medical and legal communities who argued the law remained a necessary mechanism to ensure helmet usage remains high in Seattle. Sheley Anderson, attorney for the Brain Injury Alliance of Washington and regional vice president of the NAACP, had pushed the board to do a deeper analysis on the costs and benefits of the repeal, particularly as it relates to communities of color.</p> <p>“We need the impact analysis to actually look at, does the actual helmet law itself reduce brain injuries?” she said.</p> <p>Emergency room physicians have also expressed concern about the law’s repeal. Dr. Steven Mitchell, medical director of the emergency department at Harborview Medical Center, said his opposition to the repeal is rooted in his daily experiences with people who’ve suffered a head injury.</p> <p>“I worry that the culture of people who are riding their bicycles will begin to shift away from the absolute necessity to wear them every single time,” he said in an interview.</p> <p>But advocates for the repeal argued that, while riders should wear helmets, empowering police to mandate their use is neither effective nor fair.</p> <p>“We’re unequivocally pro helmet-use,” said Lee Lambert, executive director of the Cascade Bicycle Club. However, “we have concerns about disproportionate enforcement and how it impacts people of color and unhoused people. If we’re centering safety, there are other ways we can make bicycling safer.”</p>

Ethan Campbell, whose group Central Seattle Greenways has studied how the law is being enforced, argued it was not serving its intended purpose and was being used as a pretext to stop people.

“It’s this perfect microcosm of what’s broken with our approach to policing,” he said in a phone interview. “It’s an ill-conceived law that’s feeding into highly discretionary, mostly pretextual stops.”

The law mandating that bike riders wear helmets was first passed by King County in 1993 and was expanded to explicitly include Seattle in 2003.

At the time, studies suggested that implementing helmet laws increased helmet use, especially among young people. Studies also repeatedly confirmed that helmet use reduces the severity of injuries. Fatalities and severe head injuries among cyclists decreased following the law’s implementation, according to research from Harborview Medical Center.

But recent data connecting helmet laws to their use and improved outcomes for cyclists is less clear. In Seattle, helmet use among riders of private bikes is as high as 91%, [according to one study](#). Meanwhile, in Portland, which does not have an all-ages helmet law, [one study found use is similarly high](#). [A study in King County](#) could not find any discernible impact on hospitalization rates following the law’s expansion into Seattle in 2003, although severity of injuries did decrease around the same time.

“When the Board of Health first adopted a helmet mandate, helmets weren’t part of our social norms and our culture, and so the legal requirements for helmets was new and carried weight,” said McDermott. “But I think societal norms and expectations have changed significantly in the 30 years since.”

The law came up for reconsideration this year after a [Crosscut analysis of helmet citations dating back to 2017](#). That analysis showed that, even as bike sharing has become common, enforcement by Seattle police is minimal. When the law was used to issue a citation, at a cost of \$30, nearly half the tickets went to homeless people, raising the concern that it was being used predominantly as a pretext to stop people for something else. In fact, in 2019, a Seattle Municipal Court judge tossed a firearm charge against a man that he received after being stopped for not wearing a helmet, calling the stop an illegal pretext.

A [separate analysis from Central Seattle Greenways](#) found that Black riders were roughly four times more likely to receive a citation for not wearing a helmet.

As the board considered the law’s repeal over several months, opposition was initially muted. But more recently, the board has heard from people concerned about the impacts of doing so. As a result, they tabled the repeal in October.

“The key point is that education alone does not work,” said attorney Richard Adler, who works regularly with people with severe head injuries, including Zackery Lystedt, for whom the [Lystedt law](#), related to concussion protocol in youth sports, is named. “It’s not as effective as education plus legislation.”

McDermott said he believes the case for repeal since October has strengthened. In addition to the money budgeted for helmet distribution by the county council, the Seattle Police Department recently announced it would no longer prioritize enforcement of the helmet law, among other low-level traffic offenses. Additionally, the county intends to monitor closely the impacts of the repeal in the coming years, he said.

Board member Kohl-Welles said she opposed repealing the mandate before more work was done to understand the implications of doing so. Doing otherwise, she said, was “mind-boggling.”

“The repeal to me is premature,” she said during the meeting Thursday, pounding the table at one point. “It puts the cart before the horse.”

She offered several amendments to the repeal, including delaying the repeal by a year, leaving the law on the books but eliminating ticketing and keeping the law in place for people under 18. None of the amendments passed.

	With its vote Thursday, King County joins Tacoma, which voted to repeal its helmet law in 2020. Data similarly showed it was being used only rarely and disproportionately against Black riders.
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HEADLINE	02/17 Some wary: masks in schools ending
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/education-lab/mandatory-masking-in-wa-schools-is-ending-but-some-are-wary-of-the-change/
GIST	<p>Students and teachers across the state will be able to go to class without masks starting March 21, Gov. Jay Inslee announced Thursday. For some of Washington’s youngest students, it will be their first time experiencing school without wearing a mask.</p> <p>“This is a big moment,” said state schools Superintendent Chris Reykdal, appearing with Inslee at Thursday’s news conference.</p> <p>But Reykdal also cautioned that the step doesn’t mean the end of the global virus outbreak. “It means we have a little bit more flexibility now to take that next step.”</p> <p>Masks won’t be required at schools, child care facilities and most other businesses, Inslee said, but they’ll still be required on school buses and public transit. And school districts can choose to require students and teachers to wear masks even after the mandate ends. The Department of Health will update its guidelines for schools the week of March 7.</p> <p>The announcement comes one week after Reykdal asked Inslee and the state health department to remove the statewide mask mandate and allow local health officials to make those decisions instead.</p> <p>Masks used to be the only tool to keep communities safe from COVID-19, Reykdal said, but with the widespread availability of vaccines and rapid testing, and greater knowledge of the virus, schools can take another step toward normalcy.</p> <p>But most of the half-dozen parents interviewed outside Seattle’s Kimball Elementary on Beacon Hill have reservations about dropping masks. Waiting to pick up her 6-year-old, Abeba Gugsu’s eyes grew wide when she heard about Inslee’s announcement. COVID, she said, “is still running rampant. Why not wear a mask if you can?”</p> <p>Plus, Gugsu said, she’s worried about her son bringing COVID home. She’s immunocompromised and pregnant. “The baby’s not going to be vaccinated,” she said.</p> <p>Gugsu said she didn’t buy the popular notion that masks interfere with children’s social and emotional development. “He’s still able to laugh and talk and play games,” Gugsu said of her son, adding masks haven’t stopped him from making friends.</p> <p>During a Seattle School Board meeting earlier this month, some Seattle parents told board members their young children have struggled to learn with masks on. They called for an end to the mask requirements.</p> <p>Seattle Public Schools needs to bargain with the Seattle Education Association, its teachers union, before any permanent changes are made, spokesperson Tim Robinson said. The district will also look to local public health experts for guidance.</p> <p>A group of Seattle students has been demanding stricter protocols and asked the district to provide high-quality masks. Students who are part of those activism efforts have said they won’t feel safe in school if the mandate is lifted.</p>

“Right now it does not make any sense to lift the mask mandate,” said Miles Hagopian, a seventh grader at Mercer International Middle School. “Another variant could pop up and we should try as hard as we can to limit the spread, especially at schools where you have so many different kids in one place.”

Miles, who is a member of the Seattle Student Union, a group of Seattle students leading organizing efforts, said he wouldn’t feel safe in crowded hallways without masks. Students are currently planning to take action if Seattle Schools chooses not to extend mask-wearing in schools.

“This will especially affect BIPOC students just because of access to vaccines and KN95 masks as we have already seen,” said Hagopian, referring to Black, Indigenous and people of color.

In Eastern Washington, nearly 50 districts have already called on state leaders to lift the mandate. Some school boards have also voted to make masks optional — going against the current state law.

The Washington Education Association, the state’s largest teachers union, will continue to support and follow advice from health officials, said Larry Delaney, president of the union.

“Regardless of what the issue is since the beginning of the pandemic, WEA has supported and followed the advice of public health experts,” Delaney said. “We are optimistic and put our trust in the projections they are putting out there are accurate.”

However, not all union members agree, Delaney said. Some educators say it’s too soon to end mask requirements, and some are especially concerned with the school districts that have already taken steps to make masks optional.

Coronavirus case rates at Seattle Schools have declined every week since early January, when the district hit its biggest outbreak — 1,879 cases in one week. Last week the district reported 274 cases.

Before Seattle Schools makes a decision to drop masks, Kimball parent Ammal Mohamed would like to see it assess, over at least a few months, the rate of infection not only locally but worldwide. Her son, Muadh Nur, said he agreed, although he’d like to see masks come off soon. They make his mouth sweaty and his teacher sometimes has to tell him to put his mask back on, said the 4th grader.

Elliott Hill, 8, was more eager to be done with it all. “Our mask has been on for a long time,” said the Kimball student.

His dad, David Rousseau, said he’s comfortable with masks coming off. “It seems like we are transitioning to more of an end phase,” Rousseau said. “It really should be up to the individual at this point.”

That said, he added, different regions should be able to make their own decisions based on the vulnerability of their populations, and March is a long time away. “If the data changes, everything has to adjust.”

In recent weeks, the move away from school mask mandates has grown nationwide, according to the online publication Education Week. By March 31, requirements in six states — Connecticut, Delaware, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Oregon, and Rhode Island — are scheduled to end. On Thursday, Washington became the seventh.

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HEADLINE	02/17 Workers considering back to office--or not
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/business/from-amazon-to-zillow-seattle-workers-consider-getting-back-to-office-or-not/
GIST	For many in the Seattle area, Monday’s back-to-back back-to-office announcements by Microsoft and Expedia seemed to confirm a real momentum in the region’s recovery from COVID.

Since then, politicians and business leaders have talked of “tipping points” and have predicted more back-to-office announcements — along with the welcome prospect of more workers returning to still-moribund downtowns and commercial districts. Almost on cue, a day after Monday’s news, Seattle Mayor Bruce Harrell [used his first State of the City address](#) to announce that many city workers currently working remotely will come back to the office next month.

“What it signals is that there’s relative confidence in the safety of bringing the workforce back together,” Patrick Bannon, president of the Bellevue Downtown Association, said of Microsoft’s announcement. “I can’t wait to see more people back in downtown, especially in this area where the office towers have been really quiet during the pandemic.”

But, in a way, the flurry of announcements also showed how far the region’s office-based economy remains from its pre-pandemic glory.

Conspicuously absent was any news about Amazon. The retail behemoth has stopped trying to predict a companywide return date, and is instead leaving its back-to-office policy to individual team leaders.

More broadly, many employers that have returned or set return dates aren’t actually back full time, but are using a mix of remote and in-office work.

Expedia will allow employees to work remotely roughly half of the time. Microsoft will use a “hybrid” model where employees’ work location is arranged between workers and team managers even after offices reopen.

And for every employer aiming to be mostly in-office after the pandemic, such as Bellevue-based T-Mobile, there seems to be another like Zillow, a Seattle-based real estate company, that is remaining mostly remote.

Workers themselves are split — and deeply conflicted. Many remote employees have welcomed getting back to the office, and out of the house; for others, the return is unwelcome.

When Mitchell Yin’s team at the city of Seattle’s Department of Transportation recently shifted to a mostly in-office schedule, it meant Yin had to resume his Issaquah-to-downtown-Seattle commute.

“Look, I get the arguments that it’s good to go in the office at least once a week ... to get some face time,” says Yin. But by ending remote work, Yin says, it’s as if employers are telling workers, “Oh, you want me to spend less time with my family.”

Yin isn’t alone. In a region that enthusiastically embraced remote work — [48.7% of Seattle-area workers were teleworking early in the pandemic](#) — employers already struggling to hire worry about issuing back-to-office edicts.

“We’re definitely not going to force it,” says Eric Johnson, CEO of Nintex, a Bellevue-based process automation firm that will only require workers to come in a few times a year.

“And actually, I’m really hoping some of the super large companies do, because we’ll be able to pick up some of their people,” Johnson adds.

Soul-searching

The diversity in back-to-office strategies and worker responses shows how unsettled the region remains over a question that is no longer primarily about worker safety.

“The thing that makes this so tricky for employers — and for everyone trying to forecast what it’s going to look like — is that something that happened because of a public health emergency has now opened up these questions of the rhythm of work and the quality of work, and what sorts of workplaces not only serve

the interests of employers but also the interests of employees,” says Margaret O’Mara, a University of Washington historian who has written extensively about tech hubs like Seattle.

That uncertainty, in turn, has huge implications for everything from the growing divide between white-collar and blue-collar work to the health of the commercial real estate business to the future of downtowns. The number of office workers in downtown Seattle has hovered around 25% of 2019 levels for much of the last 12 months, albeit with an encouraging uptick recently, according to [the Downtown Seattle Association](#).

In downtown Tacoma, 30% to 40% of office “seats are filled,” says David Schroedel, executive director of the Downtown Tacoma Partnership. In downtown Bellevue, where Amazon alone has added or is building more than 5 million square feet and Microsoft has a significant presence, perhaps a third of office workers are already back, says the Bellevue association’s Bannon.

Officials in all three downtowns expect those percentages to jump as omicron wanes, as the weather warms and as back-to-office momentum builds. Schroedel anticipates close to 70% occupancy in downtown Tacoma by June. Bannon is hoping for at least 50% by then. Meanwhile, Downtown Seattle Association CEO Jon Scholes predicts that the “majority of downtown’s office workers will return, even if it’s a hybrid model and the hours aren’t 9-5.”

That would bring much-needed trade back for the thousands of downtown restaurants, retailers and other businesses that once depended on office workers; it would also bring back work for the janitors, drivers and other blue-collar workers who kept those offices running.

But even the most bullish of downtown boosters acknowledges the real pace will be largely determined by the calculations of each company. Over the next few months, says Bannon, employers will be “doing their own internal soul-searching about what the right fit will be for their teams.”

Form follows function

That soul-searching covers a complicated gamut of concerns around work such as company size, productivity, work-life balance, or recruitment and retention.

At T-Mobile, CEO Mike Sievert has told employees that while there will be more flexibility than before the pandemic, the company’s corporate objectives, such as rapidly expanding its phone network, are best executed in-person, said Matthieu Marescaux, an engineer at the company’s Factoria facility.

“They’ve been straightforward,” says Marescaux of the company’s emphasis on an office-based culture — a return Marescaux supports. Even with all the remote tools now available, he says, “it’s not as good as being with somebody in person.”

That desire is shared by many professional services employers. Nationally, nearly 57% of law firm employees are back in the office, or nearly double the average for all sectors, according to [data](#) compiled by Kastle, a key-card company.

“Our work involves a lot of collaboration,” says Greg Russell, managing partner at Bellevue-based law firm Peterson Russell Kelly Livengood, where 90% of staff are now back in-office most of the time. “You can do it on Zoom and Microsoft Teams, but it’s harder.”

Some tech firms have also voiced concerns about remote work’s effects — an irony, given how the tech sector embraced telework early in the pandemic.

At Microsoft, the shift to remote work “caused the formal business groups and informal communities within Microsoft to become less interconnected and more siloed,” according to [a Microsoft study](#) posted in September. The time workers spent collaborating with colleagues in other groups fell by around 25%.

Amazon hasn't been as forthcoming about its own remote work experience. But privately, some company insiders say similar communication challenges hampered processes that require intense collaboration, such as innovation and product development.

While day-to-day “keep the lights on” efforts are fine ... some of the more forward-looking new product development has certainly been affected,” said one manager based in the Seattle area who has worked in Amazon Web Services, the company's cloud computing arm.

After going remote in 2020, “I think we just all retreated to like, ‘Well, okay, I know what I need to do today to keep the system up and running and keep the customers happy,’” added the employee, who asked to remain anonymous because they were not cleared to talk to the media.

Amazon declined to comment on those concerns. But in a letter to employees last fall, CEO Andy Jassy made clear that the company's back-to-office strategy, though it would be managed at the team level, would still have a performance-based bottom line.

Return-to-office decisions, Jassy wrote, “should be guided by what will be most effective for our customers; and not surprisingly, we will all continue to be evaluated by how we deliver for customers, regardless of where the work is performed.”

“Those folks have already made a decision”

C-level sentiments such as these coupled with the fact that many big employers have kept much of their current office space — or expanded it, in Amazon's case — suggest that many employers ultimately want a more office-focused model once the pandemic mellows.

Across the Puget Sound region, office leases were up by 11.3%, and 63% in downtown Seattle, in 2021 versus 2020, according to CBRE, a global real estate firm. The uptick reflects general economic recovery, but also the fact that employers have begun to work out “how they were going to deal with the hybrid workplace,” said John Miller, senior managing director of CBRE's Pacific Northwest offices.

Although many employers will adopt some form of hybrid model — CBRE estimates the average white-collar job will be remote 1.6 days a week, up from 0.6 days before COVID — the firm doesn't expect employers to dramatically reduce the size of their offices.

The ideal post-pandemic office, Miller predicts, is a space that is as comfortable as the home office while also inviting the kind of collaborative work that isn't possible at home. “Employees will do their heads-down work at home and come into the office to meet with clients and be around their coworkers,” he says.

Those efforts aren't confined to homier workspaces. Free or subsidized food is becoming common as firms look to entice workers back to the office.

For many business leaders, politicians and other boosters of downtowns, these continued investments are the surest proof that offices will once again be full or nearly full of workers.

There are other views. While many big employers are keeping their space, some smaller ones used remote work to shrink their offices.

Nintex, the Bellevue tech company, has subleased around 75% of the local space it had before the pandemic and redesigned the remainder “around people being able to come in occasionally with their team,” CEO Johnson says. “Effectively, Nintex has become a fully remote company.”

And, importantly, even attractive offices and free lunches may not be sufficient for workers who simply don't want to come in. Tech employers in particular are under pressure to maintain flexible arrangements after COVID.

In the Seattle area, 28% of tech workers wanted to work fully remote after the pandemic, and 56% want a hybrid approach, according to a survey of 467 workers conducted last summer by EMC Research for Sea.Citi, a Seattle-based nonprofit. Just 14% wanted to work from an office full time. Nicholas Merriam, CEO of Sea.Citi, said there is little to suggest those sentiments have changed.

That helps explain why many large tech firms have either embraced remote or hybrid work arrangements or postponed back-to-office plans. At Amazon, some managers say they worry about losing workers to competing firms or to other more flexible Amazon teams.

According to a December survey by Zillow, one in four workers was “quite likely, very likely or almost certain” to consider switching jobs “if their employer requires them to work in-person full-time.”

In fact, in the post-pandemic world, flexible work arrangements may trump free lunches as a recruitment tool.

Zillow saw the number of job applications jump nearly 56% in the first half of 2021, compared with the same period in 2019, after company announcements that employees would be allowed to work largely remotely.

Another benefit of flexibility: Zillow saw a 17% increase in the number of female applicants and a 21% increase in female managers and executive new hires in the same period, the company said.

“Candidates are really looking for flexibility,” says Dan Spaulding, chief people officer at Zillow. And, Spaulding says, “we’ve been very public about being flexible.”

That dynamic may intensify as more employers announce back-to-work strategies.

“Workers now are a lot more in the driver’s seat about their employment than they have been in the past,” said Merriam at Sea.Citi. If remote work was the exception before COVID, it’s “becoming a key benefit offer that companies have to consider if they’re going to attract and retain talent.”

Merriam doesn’t think the big office is obsolete: Surveys show that even employees who come in just few days a week prefer to have a dedicated desk, and don’t embrace “hoteling” in shared desks, he says.

But Merriam is not convinced those offices will attract anywhere near the same number of workers, regardless of the amenities. His “back of the envelope” estimate is that the number of downtown office workers after COVID will likely be down as much as 40%.

Whatever the ultimate level turns out to be, Merriam thinks it could be years before employers and employees come to a new consensus about the shape of work.

“We’re in the early days of this great experiment around remote and hybrid work,” Merriam says. “This is just beginning.”

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HEADLINE	02/17 Asian Americans in San Francisco recall
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/17/us/san-francisco-school-board-parents.html
GIST	<p>SAN FRANCISCO — As Election Day approached, a flurry of messages flashed across the phones of San Francisco’s Chinese American community. “Remember to vote,” said one message in Chinese from a campaign organizer, Selena Chu. “And throw out the commissioners who are discriminating against us and disrespecting our community.”</p> <p>The lopsided victory in a recall election Tuesday that ousted three members of the San Francisco school board shook the city’s liberal establishment and was a resounding alarm of parental anger over the way the public school system handled the coronavirus pandemic.</p>

Parents of varying ethnicities and income levels who had coalesced last year while San Francisco schools remained closed — they stayed shut for much longer than those in other large cities — organized themselves through Facebook groups and vowed to push out Board of Education members for what they saw as incompetence. They kept their promise: The three commissioners were removed by as much as 79% of voters, an unequivocal rejection in a city renowned for fractious politics.

For many Asian Americans in the city, especially the large Chinese American community, the results were an affirmation of the group's voting power, coming with a high degree of organizing, turnout and intensity not seen in many years. In an election in which every registered voter received a ballot, overall turnout was relatively low at 26%; turnout among the 30,000 people who requested Chinese-language ballots was significantly higher at 37%.

In an overwhelmingly liberal city, Asian American voters have sided with Democrats for decades. But in recent years, a growing number of Chinese residents, many of them born in mainland China, have become a moderating political force. Most Chinese residents in the city are registered as independents and, as Tuesday's election appeared to show, they are not afraid to buck some of the more liberal elements of the Democratic Party. It is a pattern that has emerged in other cities, like New York, that are largely Democratic with significant Asian American populations.

"They are absolutely up for grabs," David Lee, a political science lecturer at San Francisco State University, said of Asian American voters in the city.

In Tuesday's election, two issues in particular motivated Chinese voters. The Board of Education had voted to put in place a lottery admission system at the highly selective Lowell High School, replacing an admission process that primarily selected students with the highest grades and test scores. Lowell, whose long list of notable alumni includes U.S. Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer, for decades had represented what one community member described as the "gateway to the American dream." The introduction of the lottery system has reduced the number of Asian and white ninth graders at Lowell by around one-quarter and increased Black and Latino ninth graders by more than 40%.

Chinese voters were also upset by tweets by Alison Collins, one of the recalled school board members, that were unearthed during the campaign. Collins said Asian Americans used "white supremacist thinking to assimilate and 'get ahead.'" She went on to compare Asian Americans to slaves who had the advantage of working inside a slave owner's home instead of doing more grueling labor in the fields, using asterisks to mask an anti-Black racial slur. The tweets reinforced a sentiment among many Chinese voters of being taken for granted, underrepresented and insulted, people involved in the recall campaign said.

Asian American voters also said they were motivated by issues beyond the actions of the board: The number of high-profile attacks against Asian Americans, many of them older, has traumatized the community. And many Chinese-owned businesses were suffering the effects of pandemic closures, especially in Chinatown.

"We are losing faith in government," said Bayard Fong, president of the Chinese American Democratic Club.

Asian Americans make up about 36% of San Francisco's population, one of the largest such communities in a major city, but they are an incredibly diverse group that includes Filipinos, Indians, Vietnamese and Thais and features different economic, linguistic and ethnic backgrounds. Chinese Americans are by far the largest Asian group, making up 23% of San Francisco's population. Forty percent of the population is white, 15% Latino and 6% Black.

The ouster of the three board members will elevate the only Chinese American member of the seven-person board to the position of president. And it puts Mayor London Breed in the delicate position of appointing three replacement members who will be acceptable to the parents now closely watching the process. Recall campaigners say they hope more Asian Americans will be appointed to the board.

Autumn Looijen, who with her partner, Siva Raj, organized signature gathering and initiated the recall campaign, described the Chinese American community as crucial to the recall's success.

"They were the backbone of our volunteer efforts," Looijen said. "They have been really powering this campaign from the beginning."

During the campaign, organizers used WeChat, the Chinese-language messaging app, to offer everything from detailed instructions on how to fill out a ballot to organizing the deployment of volunteers in Chinatown, where lion dances and drumming exhorted residents to vote.

"We shall be silent no more," said a flyer in English and Chinese handed out by the Chinese American Democratic Club.

Parents who campaigned for the recall described an awakening in the Chinese American community by people who had been largely apolitical until now.

Chu, who sent the WeChat message urging people to vote, said she grew up with parents who advised her to remain quiet if she felt she was being treated unfairly. Many first-generation immigrants still feel that way, she said.

Now a mother of two children in the San Francisco public school system, Chu felt compelled, for the first time, to become actively involved in an election. Her hands hurt from texting so much on WeChat during the campaign, she said.

She was motivated by a sense of being punished and pilloried for working hard and striving.

"This year a lot of parents are telling me, 'We are done with being scapegoats,'" Chu said.

"We are still being looked at as foreigners," she said. "We are Americans. You have to give us respect."

She called the recall election a milestone for the Asian American community.

"They finally understand the power of their vote," she said.

Crucial to the organizing efforts was Ann Hsu, a Beijing-born entrepreneur with decades of experience in starting up and managing companies in both China and the United States.

Hsu used her management experience to organize volunteers and set campaign strategies. She ignored the English-language media and instead focused tightly on Chinese-language newspapers, YouTube channels and advertising. She and her volunteers distributed thousands of yellow shopping bags emblazoned with recall messages and gave them out to older Chinese residents. She set up a task force that registered 560 residents, almost all of them Asian Americans, to vote.

Using WeChat to organize her operations had the added advantage of breaking a language barrier: She speaks Mandarin while other residents are more comfortable in Cantonese. The written messages could be understood by all.

Hsu's voice filled with emotion when she discussed the issue of Lowell, which she said was the primary motivation for jumping into politics.

"When you came for Lowell, you came for the Asians," she said in an interview Wednesday. "We are going to stand up and say no more, no!"

The future admissions process at Lowell remains unclear — the lottery system will remain in place for students entering in the fall, but the board has not made a decision for admissions beyond next year.

Hsu said Lowell is not directly personal for her. Her two teenage boys are at another school in the San Francisco public school district.

But she saw in the board's decisions a deep sense that the aspirations of Asian American residents were being ignored.

The debate over admission to elite public high schools has galvanized Asian parents in other cities, notably New York. In both San Francisco and New York, the issue cleaves liberal voters who are torn between a desire to maintain a system that has traditionally benefited high-achieving students from poorer, often immigrant, backgrounds but at the same time left behind Black and Latino students.

In New York, where Black and Latino students are disproportionately underrepresented in the elite public high schools, the issue of school segregation rose to the fore during New York's mayoral election last year. Left-leaning candidates called for a fundamental overhaul of the admissions standards while centrist candidates called for its retention. Among those who promised to keep the test was Eric Adams, the current mayor.

Collins, the board member who was criticized for her tweets, said during the campaign that she had "desegregated" Lowell.

In the wake of the lopsided recall, political analysts are weighing whether the energy and fervor of the campaign will carry over into other elections both in the city and nationally.

Mike Chen, a board member of the Edwin M. Lee Asian Pacific Democratic Club, said the results were remarkable — "nobody in the city can agree 80% on anything." But he said he would "heavily caution" making predictions about other campaigns based off a single election with relatively low turnout. San Francisco had a very particular set of issues that pushed parents over the edge, he said.

"People have been trying to make extrapolations: What does this mean for school board elections in Ohio or Virginia?" he said.

"We had this very particular instance," he continued. "We had very visible examples of incompetence, bad governance and malfeasance. Most people could objectively observe the decisions that were happening last year and think, 'This is really messed up.'"

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HEADLINE	02/17 Families of captives frustrated w/DOJ
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/europe-venezuela-only-on-ap-nicolas-maduro-prisoner-exchange-ac6748a5dad08e8fb5856abe1be7bc9d
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON (AP) — When relatives of American oil executives jailed in Venezuela met virtually with a senior Justice Department official this month, it didn't take long for their frustrations to surface.</p> <p>They pressed the official on the prospects of a prisoner exchange that could get their loved ones home, but were told that was ultimately a White House decision and not something the U.S. government was generally inclined to do anyway. And they vented about the extradition to the U.S. of an associate of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro, an action that inflamed tensions with Caracas and resulted in the American captives being returned to jail from house arrest that day.</p> <p>The meeting, not previously reported and described by a person who participated in it, ended without firm commitments. But it underscored the simmering frustrations directed by some hostage and detainee families toward the Justice Department, an agency they see as unwilling to think creatively about ways to bring their relatives home from abroad and stubbornly resistant to the possibility of exchanging prisoners.</p>

“The question remains of how to get the Department of Justice to fully engage in the process of recovering hostages and wrongful detainees,” said Everett Rutherford, whose nephew, [Matthew Heath](#), is being held in Venezuela on what the Tennessee man’s family says are bogus weapons charges.

“And there hasn’t yet been an answer given to that yet — except for the fact that we’ve been told that the president himself can direct them to do so.”

The Justice Department isn’t typically thought of as a lead agency in hostage matters. The State Department, after all, has diplomatic tools at its disposal and is home to the government’s chief hostage negotiator, while the Pentagon has authority to launch military raids to free hostages from captivity. The three agencies’ interests aren’t always necessarily in sync on hostage issues, which can be overshadowed by broader national security or diplomatic concerns — or, in the case of the Justice Department, what the government thinks is best for holding criminals accountable.

The Justice Department said in a statement that it “recognizes that families are put in an extraordinarily difficult circumstance, with unimaginable pain” when Americans are wrongfully detained and that it works with other federal agencies to bring them home in a manner consistent with the government’s “no-concessions” policy in hostage matters.

From the U.S. government’s perspective, a prisoner swap risks creating a false equivalency between a wrongfully detained American and a justly convicted felon, and could also encourage additional captures by foreign countries.

Mickey Bergman, who as vice president of the Richardson Center for Global Engagement has worked on hostage cases, said he’s heard that argument but thinks “the framing is wrong.”

“Because it’s not about the guilty people that get released, it’s about the innocent Americans that come back home,” Bergman said. “And so I reverse the question and say: Is leaving ... innocent Americans to rot in prisons around the world worth the insistence of us having criminals, foreign criminals, serve their full time in the American system?”

The issue is newly relevant as several countries or groups holding Americans, including Russia and the Taliban, have floated the names of prisoners in the U.S. they want released.

The families’ frustration is less with current political leadership of the Justice Department than with the nature of the institution itself, an agency that across administrations has prioritized its independence and its prerogative to make prosecutorial decisions and sentencing recommendations free from political considerations. The instinct is crucial for democracy, but it can also result in actions that hostage families see as dismissive of their interests.

The October extradition to Miami of Colombian businessman Alex Saab, presented by U.S. officials as a close Maduro associate, agitated relatives of six Citgo executives who’ve been jailed for years in Venezuela over a never-executed plan to refinance billions in the oil company’s bonds. It was a tension point in this month’s Justice Department call and in a December meeting between hostage families and national security adviser Jake Sullivan, though the situation may be complicated by [the revelation this week that Saab](#) was signed up by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration as a source in 2018.

The reticence to swaps predates the Biden administration, and some of the deals the families seek didn’t gain traction under former President Donald Trump either. Even so, there is a precedent for arrangements that serve a diplomatic purpose.

The Trump administration, seen as more willing to flout convention in hostage affairs, [brought home Navy veteran Michael White in 2020](#) in an agreement that spared an American-Iranian doctor prosecuted by the Justice Department any more time behind bars and that permitted him to return to Iran. Even before then, the Obama administration pardoned or dropped charges against seven Iranians in a prisoner exchange tied to the nuclear deal with Tehran. Three jailed Cubans were sent home in 2014 as Havana released American Alan Gross after five years’ imprisonment.

There are roughly 60 Americans known to be held hostage or wrongfully detained, a definition that covers Americans believed innocent or jailed for the purpose of exacting concessions from the U.S. Families of at least some see fresh opportunities to cut deals.

The Taliban, whose Haqqani network is believed to be holding [Navy veteran Mark Frerichs of Illinois](#), has told the U.S. it seeks the release of imprisoned drug lord Bashir Noorzai. Russia has locked up [Marine veteran Trevor Reed](#), sentenced to nine years on charges he assaulted police officers in Moscow, and Michigan engineer [Paul Whelan, imprisoned on espionage charges](#). Officials there have floated at various times the names of citizens it would like home, including international arms dealer Viktor Bout and drug smuggler Konstantin Yaroshenko, both imprisoned in the U.S.

Nine Americans, including Heath and the so-called Citgo 6, are detained in Venezuela at a time when the U.S. is holding two nephews of Venezuela's first lady on drug charges.

Some hostage and detainee families say they're heartened by the access they've had to senior administration officials, including Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Sullivan. But the resistance to a trade has remained constant.

Charlene Cakora, Frerichs' sister, met with White House and Justice Department officials last August and says she was told that Noorzai, a convicted Afghan drug lord, was a "bad guy." She said in an interview that if the government won't "trade for my brother, then I want to know what other ideas are out there."

Paula Reed and Joey Reed, Trevor's parents, say U.S. officials have told them that they'd seek the same outcome if they were their shoes. But though the Granbury, Texas, couple has urged Justice Department officials during meetings to seek a deal now, the officials have said only that they're "considering everything," said Paula Reed.

"They didn't say: 'Oh, we agree with you, that's a great deal. That's a good point.' They didn't say anything like that. They just said: 'We hear you. Thank you very much,'" she said. "They didn't give us indication one way or the other."

Elizabeth Whelan, Paul's sister, said she's been grateful for the U.S. government's attention. She said she's not entirely sure what Russia wants for her brother and said demands by it and other countries seem "stupid" and "over the top."

"But," she added, "I feel my brother is worth whatever Russia is asking for."

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HEADLINE	02/17 Legislative staff hold sickout after bill dies
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/politics/legislative-staff-hold-sickout-after-collective-bargaining-bill-dies-in-wa-legislature/
GIST	<p>OLYMPIA — Washington's Democratic state lawmakers often talk up worker solidarity and union organizing.</p> <p>But after they failed to advance a bill this week to allow their own staffers to collectively bargain, Democratic legislators got a taste of organizing from the boss's side of the table.</p> <p>On Wednesday, scores of Democratic legislative staffers engaged in a sickout after learning that House Bill 1806 would not advance.</p> <p>Nearly three dozen emails sent Wednesday morning by The Seattle Times to House Democratic legislative assistants bounced back with out-of-office messages.</p>

“Thank you for your email. Due to recent events, I may be unavailable this morning,” read many of the emails. “In Solidarity.”

At least 34 Senate Democratic staffers also joined the sickout, according to Senate Deputy Majority Leader Rebecca Saldaña, D-Seattle. Republican legislative leaders in a regularly scheduled news conference Wednesday said they weren’t aware of their own staffers joining in.

In interviews, several current and former Democratic legislative staffers described why they want a union, from high workloads, inadequate pay and the complexities that come with working for politicians, to the desire for a stronger voice on diversity issues. Current staffers declined to be named out of fear of repercussions.

“Everything from issues of salary and overtime, workload with COVID,” said Nicole Herrera, a former Senate Democratic communications staffer.

Staffers saw their workload spike amid the pandemic as state residents flooded their phones and inboxes asking for help with unemployment insurance claims, rental assistance and other urgent needs, according to Herrera and others.

“The workload just at least doubled, especially for legislative assistants,” said Herrera, who left her position a few weeks ago to take another job outside the Legislature. “They’re the ones who help make that place run. The members couldn’t do without them.”

One current House Democratic staffer participating in the sickout described working nearly 20 hours of overtime each week since November.

“All of that is uncompensated,” said the staffer, adding, “We want a better workplace today, not tomorrow, not next session.”

HB 1806 would authorize workers in the legislative branch of government to collectively bargain. Rep. Marcus Riccelli, D-Spokane, sponsored the bill, and most of the other 56 House Democrats signed on as co-sponsors.

Similar legislation was proposed in [2019 and 2020](#). In 2019, the Legislature [passed a law to allow](#) 600 assistant attorneys general to unionize.

In a regularly scheduled news conference Wednesday, Democratic legislative leaders expressed sympathy with their workers but said HB 1806 was too complicated to figure out during this short legislative session, which ends March 10.

“I am actually seeing a really good plan and light at the end of the railroad tunnel about how we get there” to pass the bill, said House Speaker Laurie Jenkins, D-Tacoma. But, “We won’t get there till probably next session.”

Lawmakers must figure out details surrounding the bill, said Jenkins, and there would probably be items in the forthcoming state supplemental budget to help prepare the bill again for next session.

Jenkins was supportive of the staffers’ sickout, she said, since they don’t have the ability to lobby and other ways to express their thoughts.

In an interview, a Senate Democratic staffer said they were unimpressed by the legislative leaders’ explanations for why the bill died.

“I fully disagree that the bill is not ready, and I fully disagree that we should wait till next year,” said that staffer.

	<p>The staffer worried a delay could push the bill off until legislative workers doing the organizing moved on to other jobs, potentially lowering the pressure on lawmakers to pass the unionizing bill.</p> <p>“Another year, they’ll wait until they cycle out and maybe take some steam out of the issue,” said the staffer.</p> <p>The explanations by legislative leaders also left Herrera unimpressed.</p> <p>““Oh, it’s just not ready, we’re so happy it’s gotten this far, let’s celebrate that,”” Herrera said. “And we’re like, ‘Hmm, no.’”</p>
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HEADLINE	02/17 Recall: Sure, Brut deodorant spray
SOURCE	https://www.cbsnews.com/news/sure-brut-deodorant-spray-recall-benzene/
GIST	<p>Sure and Brut aerosol deodorant sprays sold nationwide are being recalled due to the presence of benzene, a cancer-causing chemical, according to a notice posted by the Food and Drug Administration.</p> <p>The recall includes all lot numbers with expiration dates on or before August 2023, TCP Hot Acquisition dba HRB Brands, which markets the products, stated Wednesday in a news release.</p> <p>"While benzene is not an ingredient in any of the recalled products, our review showed that unexpected levels of benzene came from the propellant that sprays the product out of the can," TCP said.</p> <p>The consumer products company sold its personal care business to HRB Brands in 2021 for \$44.7 million in cash.</p> <p>Classified as a human carcinogen, benzene can be inhaled or absorbed through skin, resulting in cancers including leukemia, as well as life-threatening blood disorders, the recall stated.</p> <p>Widely used in manufacturing, benzene is present throughout the environment and can cause cancer with repeated exposure, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.</p> <p>Consumers were urged to stop using the recalled products. Those with questions can call (866) 615-0976 or request a refund at www.brutsurerecall2022.com.</p> <p>The five products impacted by the recall are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brut Classic Antiperspirant Aerosol (4 oz) (UPC 00827755070085) • Brut Classic Antiperspirant Aerosol (6 oz) (UPC 000827755070108) • Brut Classic Deodorant Aerosol (10.0 oz) (UPC 00827755070047) • Sure Regular Antiperspirant Aerosol (6.0 oz) (UPC 00883484002025) • Sure Unscented Antiperspirant Aerosol (6.0 oz) (UPC 00883484002278) <p>A sixth product was distributed in Canada:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brut Classic Deodorant Aerosol (154g) (UPC 00827755070177) <p>Last year, more than half a dozen products were recalled due to benzene, including six brands of Procter & Gamble dry shampoo and conditioner spray products.</p> <p>Other prior recalls include five sunscreen products by Coppertone, found to contain benzene in late September, while Johnson & Johnson in July recalled five of its sunscreens found to contain benzene. Another expanded recall involved hand sanitizer sprays found to contain benzene.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/17 Recall: Abbott baby formula
SOURCE	https://www.cbsnews.com/news/baby-formula-recall-abbott/

GIST	<p>Abbott voluntarily recalled several of its baby formula products after four infants reportedly got sick. The powder formulas were distributed across the country, and possibly exported to other countries, the Food and Drug Administration said.</p> <p>The powder formulas impacted by the recall include Similac, Alimentum and EleCare. To identify if you have an impacted bottle, check the number on the bottom of the bottle. If it starts with digits 22 through 37 and contains K8, SH or Z2, or has an expiration of April 1, 2022, or later, it should be thrown out. All of the formulas were produced at the company's Sturgis, Michigan, facility, the company said.</p> <p>The four infants, located in Texas, Ohio and Minnesota, were diagnosed with bacteria infections <i>cronobacter sakazakii</i> and <i>salmonella</i> Newport and hospitalized. One of the infants may have died of <i>cronobacter</i>, according to the FDA.</p> <p>The company said it has tested samples of the formula from the plant, as well as samples from the four complaints, and all of the tests have come back negative. The company did say it found evidence of <i>cronobacter</i> in the Michigan plant in non-product areas.</p> <p>The FDA said that several environment samples from the plant have tested positive for <i>cronobacter</i>.</p> <p><i>Cronobacter</i> bacteria can cause sepsis or meningitis, which can be severe and life-threatening illnesses, according to the FDA. Symptoms of sepsis and meningitis include poor feeding, irritability, temperature changes, jaundice, grunting breaths and abnormal movements.</p> <p><i>Salmonella</i> can cause gastrointestinal illness and fever called salmonellosis, the FDA said. Symptoms include diarrhea, fever and abdominal cramps. Severe cases of salmonellosis can cause a high fever, aches, headaches, lethargy, rashes and blood in urine or stool. It can become fatal.</p> <p>The investigation, which include the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the FDA, is ongoing.</p> <p>"We want to reassure the public that we're working diligently with our partners to investigate complaints related to these products, which we recognize include infant formula produced at this facility, while we work to resolve this safety concern as quickly as possible," said Frank Yiannas, FDA deputy commissioner for food policy and response.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/17 California adopts 'endemic' virus policy
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/california-adopts-nations-1st-endemic-virus-policy-82973978
GIST	<p>SACRAMENTO, Calif. -- California became the first state to formally shift to an "endemic" approach to the coronavirus with Gov. Gavin Newsom's announcement Thursday of a plan that emphasizes prevention and quick reaction to outbreaks over mandated masking and business shutdowns.</p> <p>The milestone, nearly two years in the making, envisions a return to a more normal existence with the help of a variety of initiatives and billions in new spending to more quickly spot surges or variants, add health care workers, stockpile tests and push back against false claims and other misinformation.</p> <p>"We are moving past the crisis phase into a phase where we will work to live with this virus," he said during a news conference from a state warehouse brimming with pandemic supplies in Fontana, east of Los Angeles.</p> <p>The first-term Democrat, who last year survived a recall election driven by critics of his governance during the pandemic, promised the state's nearly 40 million residents that as the omicron surge fades, "we're going to keep them safe and we're going to stay on top of this."</p> <p>A disease reaches the endemic stage when the virus still exists in a community but becomes manageable as immunity builds. But there will be no definitive turn of the switch, the Democratic governor said, unlike</p>

the case with Wednesday's lifting of the state's indoor masking requirements or an announcement coming Feb. 28 of when precisely schoolchildren can stop wearing face coverings.

And there will be no immediate lifting of the dozens of remaining executive emergency orders that have helped run the state since Newsom imposed the nation's first statewide stay-home order in March 2020.

"This pandemic won't have a defined end. There's no finish line," Newsom said.

The World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 outbreak a pandemic on March 11, 2020, and with omicron fading in many parts of the world some countries have begun planning for the endemic stage. But no state has taken the step Newsom did and offered a detailed forward-looking plan.

Republicans have been frequent critics of Newsom's handling of the coronavirus and were quick to disparage his latest effort. State GOP Chairwoman Jessica Millan Patterson called it "an extra-large helping of word salad" and renewed the call to "follow the lead of other blue states and end his state of emergency or lift his school mask mandate."

Newsom's plan sets specific goals, such as stockpiling 75 million masks, establishing the infrastructure to provide up to 200,000 vaccinations and 500,000 tests a day in the event of an outbreak, and adding 3,000 medical workers within three weeks in surge areas.

Newsom's administration came up with a shorthand acronym to capsule key elements of its new approach: SMARTER. The letters stand for Shots, Masks, Awareness, Readiness, Testing, Education and Rx, a reference to improving treatments for COVID-19.

Dr. Jeffrey Klausner, an epidemiologist at the University of Southern California, said while some may argue these should have come sooner, he believes "the timing is right on."

"Surveillance, testing, vaccination and treatment make the context very different and make it appropriate to shift our response from a pandemic response of trying to do everything possible, to a more rational response to try to implement things that we have strong evidence that work," Klausner said.

The plan includes increased monitoring of virus remnants in wastewater to watch for the first signs of a surge. Masks won't be required but will be encouraged in many settings.

If a higher level of the virus is detected, health officials will determine if it is a new variant. If so, state and federal officials have a goal to within 30 days determine if it responds to existing tests, treatments and immunities from vaccines or prior infections.

California's health secretary, Dr. Mark Ghaly, said one of the goals is to avoid business closures and other far-reaching mandates. However, he said the state's requirement that schoolchildren be vaccinated against coronavirus by fall remains in effect.

The plan includes new education, including "myth-buster videos" to fight misinformation and disinformation and help interpret ever-evolving precautions for a confused public whiplashed by safeguards that seemingly shift by the day and vary across county lines.

In coordination with the federal government, it calls for a first-in-the-nation study of the pandemic's direct and indirect impacts long-term on both people and communities.

All this will cost billions, much of it already outlined in the pandemic response package Newsom sought as part of his budget last month. That includes \$1.9 million that lawmakers already approved to boost staffing at hospitals and increase coronavirus testing and vaccine distribution, as well as existing money and anticipated federal funds.

	<p>His proposed budget also includes \$1.7 billion to beef up the state's health care workforce, with more investment in increased laboratory testing capacity, data collection and outbreak investigation.</p> <p>Newsom, who has faced criticism for sometimes failing to follow his own rules, defended keeping in place some of his executive emergency orders, which he said most recently have allowed the state to quickly bring in temporary medical workers and to quickly distribute more than 13 million home test kits to schools.</p> <p>Those orders have dwindled from 561 to fewer than 100 in recent months, he said, and his administration is working with legislative leaders to eventually make them unnecessary.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/18 Germany: omicron peak crossed
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/health-minister-germany-passed-omicron-peak-82976048
GIST	<p>BERLIN -- Germany has crossed over the peak of new daily infections with the omicron variant of COVID-19, the country's health minister said on Friday.</p> <p>Health Minister Karl Lauterbach said government measures to curb infection numbers have been effective, but he warned against relaxing the public health rules too hastily.</p> <p>"We are not really in safe waters," he told reporters in Berlin.</p> <p>Lauterbach, an epidemiologist by training, noted that as many as 12% of people over age 60 in Germany are still unvaccinated. That share is three to four times higher than that of unvaccinated, vulnerable population groups in comparable countries.</p> <p>Germany has been slower than many of its neighbors to relax pandemic restrictions. Chancellor Olaf Scholz and the country's 16 state governors agreed Wednesday on a three-step plan to end most of the country's COVID-19 rules by March 20.</p> <p>Lauterbach defended the cautious approach, saying that "if we open too quickly, then the case numbers will rise again."</p> <p>He also said a general vaccine mandate was still necessary, noting that new or existing variants of the virus could lead to a fresh wave of infections in the fall that could put a severe strain on the health system.</p> <p>Lauterbach urged opposition lawmakers not to block compulsory vaccination proposals over party politicking. Parliament is expected to hold a free vote on the issue, but the opposition Union bloc has increasingly moved away from backing the idea in recent weeks.</p> <p>Germany's disease control agency on Friday reported 220,048 newly confirmed daily cases of COVID-19 and 264 additional deaths.</p> <p>The Robert Koch Institute said almost a quarter of the German population — nearly 20 million people — haven't been vaccinated. This includes about four million children under five for whom vaccination hasn't yet been authorized, it said.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/18 Hong Kong languishes amid Covid surge
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/covid-policy-drags-hong-kong-economy-cases-surge-82976689
GIST	<p>HONG KONG -- Hong Kong's Fung Shing Restaurant was bustling this week as customers came for one last taste of the traditional Cantonese dim sum that has made it famous.</p> <p>With COVID-19 restrictions cutting too deeply into its bottom line, the restaurant will shut its doors for good on Sunday, another economic victim of the pandemic.</p>

Many fear the worst is yet to come with Hong Kong experiencing its most severe outbreak, and fret the authorities' determination to stick to mainland China's "zero-tolerance" strategy may prevent it from recovering as a financial and travel hub.

"Even though maybe zero-COVID can be reached, there is still uncertainty on how long it can be maintained and what the cost is of maintaining it," said Natixis senior economist Gary Ng.

"The biggest risk of Hong Kong in 2022 is that it may be entering the path of basically, if not recession, at least a downward drag in economic growth again while the world begins to normalize," Ng said.

Hong Kong has seen banks close branches and movie theaters have shut down. The streets of popular shopping and dining districts are lined with shops displaying "for rent" signs. Its international airport is nearly devoid of travelers.

A ban on onsite dining after 6 p.m., imposed last month, is depriving restaurants of critical dinner and banquet revenues.

Daily new coronavirus cases exceeded 2,000 for the first time on Monday; on Thursday, 6,116 new cases were reported.

Hospitals are becoming overwhelmed so the city is looking into converting hotels and even unoccupied public housing into quarantine areas. But it shows no sign of backing away from matching mainland China's stringent policies even as the rest of the world learns to live with the coronavirus.

As part of its zero-tolerance strategy, China has locked down entire cities, literally keeping people sequestered in their homes and providing them with food and supplies as they are isolated during extensive testing and contact tracing to quell outbreaks.

But China has many cities. Hong Kong, a former British colony and semi-autonomous region of China, lacks the resources for such a complete lockdown, which would halt virtually all economic activity in the city of about 7.5 million.

And people living in Hong Kong, which was handed over to Communist-ruled China in 1997 under a "one country, two systems" approach, are used to greater freedoms than residents of the mainland. Lockdowns of single buildings or city blocks have raised vehement criticism.

Regional rival Singapore faces a similar wave of coronavirus infections caused by the highly contagious omicron variant. But it has opted for a strategy of "living with COVID." That calls for very high vaccination rates and widespread testing. Unlike Hong Kong, which is requiring people who test positive to quarantine in hospitals or other government facilities, Singapore lets COVID-19 patients with mild or no symptoms isolate at home.

So while Singapore's health care system is not in jeopardy of becoming overwhelmed, Hong Kong hospitals are at 90% capacity and some have had to treat patients outdoors for lack of room inside.

Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam shows no sign of retreating from the "zero-COVID" stance, saying Thursday that fighting the pandemic is her "paramount task" and the city would "not be distracted by other things."

"We will impose any measures that we should," she said. "The aim is to make sure Hong Kong people's lives and health are protected and to uphold Hong Kong's stability."

On Friday, Lam announced she was postponing the city's election for chief executive for six weeks to May 8 due to "public health risks" it would pose at this stage in the pandemic. It's not yet clear if Lam will run for reelection.

To relieve some pressure on hospitals, officials now say some patients with mild symptoms will be able to leave hospitals after just seven days — half the current requirement — if they test negative and are not living with any high-risk individuals.

At the current rate of spread of infections, new daily cases could rise to 28,000 by March, so it's unclear that will be enough.

On the other hand, relaxing the zero-COVID strategy would hinder travel between the city and the mainland, where authorities require three weeks of quarantine or more. Beijing will not reopen Hong Kong's border with the mainland until the city reaches and maintains zero COVID-19 cases.

Chinese leader Xi Jinping said this week that Hong Kong's "overriding task" is to get control of the situation. Some health experts from the mainland arrived Thursday to help with testing. Beijing also sent antibodies and other resources.

Customers at the Fung Shing Restaurant said they feel powerless.

"I feel so helpless for this restaurant under the pandemic," said customer Mo Wan, a 78-year-old who has been a regular for the past decade. "I have established a deep friendship with the staff members."

Up to 3,000 of Hong Kong's 17,000 restaurants could end up closing if current restrictions continue through March, said Michael Leung, chairman of the Association for Hong Kong Catering Services Management, which represents 800 restaurant owners.

Leung has temporarily shuttered his own restaurant, the Lucky Dragon Palace.

It's a sprawling establishment that would normally seat 1,000 before the pandemic. Leung hopes to hold on, paying the rent and saving on labor and utilities until he can reopen.

"The pandemic is very serious, there's barely anyone on the street," he said. "With fewer people going out, it means no business for restaurants. This fifth wave really impacts us terribly. It's really an ice age for the catering business."

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HEADLINE	02/17 EU leaders push diplomacy, sanctions unity
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/eu-leaders-meet-discuss-ukraine-crisis-push-diplomacy-82953255
GIST	<p>BRUSSELS -- European Union leader held a short summit meeting Thursday to push the chances of diplomacy to unlock the standoff over Ukraine and reaffirm their joint determination to impose massive sanctions if Russia invades its neighbor.</p> <p>The hastily called summit preceded a two-day EU-Africa meeting which brought the 27 EU leaders to Brussels. It did not go into deep detail of what sanctions should be used and how those measures would hit the economies of the member states.</p> <p>But since unanimity among the 27 is needed to impose sanctions, any show of unity is welcome for the bloc.</p> <p>"Sanctions require unanimity of the member states," said EU foreign affairs chief Josep Borrell. "This unity is there in order to use it," he said, and when asked if it included often recalcitrant Hungary, he added "I said, all."</p> <p>The main aim of the meeting was to make sure that even if potential sanctions hurt some member nations more than others, they would not affect the unity of the bloc.</p>

	<p>Borrell insisted that if there were to be a Russian aggression against Ukraine, he would immediately call the 27 EU foreign ministers to a special council “to propose the package of sanctions. And I’m sure that even when unanimity is required, the council will approve them.”</p> <p>The EU has joined the United Kingdom and the United States in insisting that Russia would be hit with massive sanctions if it invades Ukraine.</p> <p>German Chancellor Olaf Scholz joined others in warning about dire consequences, but said that “at the same time we want to use all diplomatic possibilities we have.”</p> <p>EU Commission president Ursula von der Leyen said that “diplomacy has not yet spoken its last word. That is good and we have still hope that peace will prevail.”</p> <p>Von der Leyen joined calls for Russia to physically provide proof its troops are moving away from confrontation near the Ukraine border.</p> <p>“Now we hear claims from Russia about pulling back troops, but we have not seen any signs so far of de-escalation on the ground,” she said. “To the contrary, we see that the build-up continues. Therefore, now we need deeds to trust the words we have heard. We will not let our guard down.”</p>
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HEADLINE	02/17 Shortages, inflation frustrate Cubans
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/shortages-inflation-frustrate-cubans-struggling-82957451
GIST	<p>Julia Sardiñas awoke early so she could reach a grocery store in Cuba's capital by 6 a.m.</p> <p>After seven hours in line, she achieved her goal: the purchase of two plastic 1 liter bottles of cooking oil for which she paid 48 Cuban pesos — \$2 — each.</p> <p>“I was standing for many hours; you have to wait your turn to be able enter for two bottles, but it's something,” said the retired 65-year-old.</p> <p>Grocery shopping has become an increasingly costly and arduous struggle for many people in a country where the pandemic, inefficient production, government controls and U.S. economic sanctions have aggravated an economic crisis.</p> <p>A drastic drop in crucial tourism income caused by COVID-19 helped spur the government last year to adopt reforms it had long considered. Those included elimination of an inefficient dual currency system that had made the local peso — in which most Cubans were paid — a sort of second-class currency. It had been a poor cousin to the “convertible peso” used by tourists, people who worked with them and those who received money from relatives abroad.</p> <p>Adoption of a single currency for all, along with shortages, led within a few months to sharply increased prices for many goods that weren't matched, for most at least, by the simultaneous rise in salaries.</p> <p>And because the government has had trouble producing or importing all the goods needed, it also led to emergence of a black market, with people paying a premium for dollars or for scarce items.</p> <p>That has led to limits on individual purchases. The state store where Sardiñas bought her oil scanned her identity card to ensure she wasn't buying more than two at a time.</p> <p>The problems have fed a sense of inequity among many that is especially bitter in a socialist system that prides itself in a relatively equal distribution of goods.</p>

"It's impossible to maintain my family on my salary," complained Marcia Ochoa, a state worker who said she makes 2,400 pesos — \$100 at the official rate — each month and lives with her husband and elderly parents.

She said she depended on money sent by her son in the United States to help buy things like soap, shampoo and food.

Life became more complicated when the administration of former U.S. President Donald Trump tightened economic sanctions on Cuba in November 2020 and blocked remittances via Western Union.

Her son used to send her roughly \$100 a month via Western Union. "I could go to a store to shop and resolve many problems."

With those exchange houses closed, she relies on visitors who bring in money from her son and recently got about 70 pesos per dollar on the informal market — nearly three times the official rate. That black market rate over the past week rose further, to about 100 to 1.

To help confront shortages and bring in hard currency, the government also expanded a network of hard currency stores that are often better stocked but much more costly than standard shops. They now accept dollar-linked debit cards — though not cash itself. Cubans can use euros or Canadian dollars to purchase such cards.

But long lines now are common both in local and hard currency stores, where products ranging from soap to beans to chicken tend to suddenly appear and rapidly vanish.

That's led to an increasing black market as people speculate by buying what they can and reselling it days later when shortages increase.

In recent weeks, the price of powdered milk touched about \$40 a kilo (\$18 a pound) on the black market

"There are many factors (for the rising prices), but the principle is the fall in the supply of goods and services," said economist Omar Everleny Pérez.

The government itself has recognized inflation as a serious problem.

Economy Minister Alejandro Gil said overall prices rose by about 70% in 2021, though increases for some goods clearly have been far greater.

A carton of 30 eggs cost 150 pesos — \$6 — last year, but are now 400 pesos on the black market. A package of sausage that cost 40 pesos is now 118 even in official stores. Pork that used to cost 40 pesos a pound now goes for 200.

"In the country it is the topic of greatest debate and worry," Gil said recently on state television. "We are permanently seeking alternatives within our possibilities."

He said the problem was due to "a deficit of supply," given limited domestic production, which "brings with it speculation and resale" of goods.

Still, he noted that prices for electricity, communications and subsidized basic good rations had held steady, even if rations have been cut back in recent years.

Inflation and shortages were commonly cited complaints among Cubans who took to the streets in nearly unprecedented protests last July.

While the government has moved to allow more private enterprise in a system once almost wholly state controlled, many economists say it needs to be yet more flexible, for example by allowing freer export and

	<p>imports and allowing more professionals to work privately. Some urge greater autonomy for state enterprises estimated to employ 70% of working Cubans.</p> <p>“There are many short-term macroeconomic imbalances that are strangling a part of the population and the companies,” said Oscar Fernandez, an economist at the University of Havana.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/17 Russia to stage nuclear forces drills
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-joe-biden-europe-russia-moscow-c2e55b8b2b061b58e2b140d2a6dc1d57
GIST	<p>KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Russia announced massive drills of its nuclear forces Friday amid soaring East-West tensions, as the U.S. issued some of its starkest, most detailed warnings yet about how a Russian invasion of Ukraine might unfold.</p> <p>U.S. President Joe Biden sounded unusually dire a day earlier, as he warned that Washington saw no signs of a promised Russian withdrawal — but instead saw more troops moving toward the border with Ukraine. “Every indication we have is they’re prepared to go into Ukraine, attack Ukraine,” Biden told reporters at the White House. He said the U.S. has “reason to believe” that Russia is “engaged in a false flag operation to have an excuse to go in,” but he did not provide details.</p> <p>Some are concerned the longtime separatist conflict simmering in eastern Ukraine could provide just that cover. The area saw intensifying shelling and apparent cyberattacks over the past two days.</p> <p>With tensions already at their highest level since the Cold War, the Russian military announced that President Vladimir Putin will monitor a sweeping exercise of the country’s nuclear forces Saturday that will involve multiple practice missile launches — a stark reminder of the country’s nuclear might amid the showdown with the West.</p> <p>Western fears focus on an estimated 150,000 Russian troops — including about 60% of Russia’s overall ground forces — posted around Ukraine’s borders. The Kremlin insists it has no plans to invade, but it has long considered Ukraine part of its sphere of influence and NATO’s eastward expansion an existential threat. Moscow’s key demand in this crisis is that NATO promise never to allow Ukraine to join — a move the Western alliance has roundly rejected.</p> <p>Biden planned to speak by phone Friday with trans-Atlantic leaders about the Russian military buildup and continued efforts at deterrence and diplomacy.</p> <p>U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken revealed some conclusions of U.S. intelligence, part of a strategy designed to expose and pre-empt any invasion planning. The U.S. has declined to reveal much of the evidence underlying its claims.</p> <p>Blinken told diplomats at the U.N. Security Council that a sudden, seemingly violent event staged by Russia to justify an invasion would kick off the assault. Blinken mentioned a “so-called terrorist bombing” inside Russia, a staged drone strike, “a fake, even a real attack ... using chemical weapons.”</p> <p>The invasion would open with cyberattacks, along with missile strikes and bombs across Ukraine, Blinken said, describing the entry of Russian troops and their advance on Kyiv, a city of nearly 3 million, and other key targets.</p> <p>At NATO headquarters in Brussels, U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin questioned the Russian troop pullout claims.</p> <p>“We’ve seen some of those troops inch closer to that border,” he said. “We even see them stocking up their blood supplies. You don’t do these sort of things for no reason, and you certainly don’t do them if you’re getting ready to pack up and go home.”</p>

Despite the stark U.S. warnings, Ukrainian officials sought to project calm, with Oleksii Danilov, head of the National Security and Defense Council, saying late Thursday that there were no signs a massive Russian invasion was imminent.

Nevertheless, U.S. and European officials were on high alert for any Russian attempts to create a pretext for invasion, according to a Western official familiar with intelligence findings. Ukrainian government officials shared intelligence with allies that suggested the Russians might try to shell the areas in the Luhansk region controlled by Moscow-backed separatists on Friday morning as part of an effort to create a false reason to take military action, according to the official who was not authorized to comment publicly.

The area saw a sharp spike in shelling Thursday, with monitors from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe reporting more than 500 explosions before the tensions eased in the evening. Ukrainian authorities and separatists traded accusations of violations of a shaky truce in the nearly 8-year-old conflict in Ukraine's eastern industrial heartland, called Donbas. The conflict erupted shortly after Russia's 2014 annexation of the Ukrainian Crimean Peninsula and [has killed 14,000](#).

The Ukrainian military command said shells hit a kindergarten in Stanytsia Luhanska, wounding two adults, and cut power to half the town. The rebels said nearly 19 houses were damaged by Ukrainian fire.

Early Friday, separatist authorities in the Luhansk and Donetsk regions reported more shelling by Ukrainian forces along the tense line of contact.

Ukrainian officials charged that the rebels intensified the shelling in the hopes of provoking a retaliatory attack by government forces.

The Ukrainian military chief, Valerii Zaluzhnyi, said that it's "not planning any offensive operations or shelling of civilians," adding that "our actions are purely defensive."

But fears persist the violence could spark a wider conflict, and Western powers scrambled to avert, or prepare for, eventual invasion.

NATO's defense ministers [discussed ways to bolster defenses in Eastern Europe](#), while EU leaders [huddled over how to punish Russia if it invades](#). Blinken and Vice President Kamala Harris are among political, military and diplomatic leaders heading to an annual security conference in Munich that will see urgent consultations on the crisis.

The U.S. and Russia also planned some talks in the coming days. Blinken is expected to meet his Russian counterpart next week, and Russia's Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu is set to have a call with Austin on Friday, the Russian military said.

In the face of Western doubts over Russia's assertion that it's sending some forces back to bases, Moscow said the pullout would take time. Russia also made a new diplomatic overture Thursday, handing the U.S. a response to offers to engage in talks on limiting missile deployments in Europe, restrictions on military drills and other confidence-building measures.

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HEADLINE	02/17 Dutch troops extreme violence Indonesia
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/study-dutch-troops-extreme-violence-indonesia-82950941
GIST	THE HAGUE, Netherlands -- Dutch troops used "extreme violence" — often deliberately — during Indonesia's 1940s war for independence, and military leaders and politicians in the Netherlands largely ignored the excesses, a long-running research project concluded in findings published Thursday.

The 4 1/2-year investigation by experts from three historical research institutes contradicts the Dutch government's long-held view that the country's troops engaged in extreme violence only sporadically as they battled pro-independence forces in what became Indonesia.

In a statement, the researchers said the sources they consulted “show that the use of extreme violence by the Dutch armed forces was not only widespread, but often deliberate, too. It was condoned at every level: political, military and legal.”

The researchers said it was not possible to give exact numbers of crimes and victims.

In 2013, the Dutch government apologized for some atrocities committed by its forces between 1945, when Indonesia declared its independence from Dutch colonial rule, and 1949, when the Netherlands finally recognized Indonesia's independence.

Dutch King Willem-Alexander formally apologized during a 2020 state visit to Indonesia for his country's past aggression.

Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte said Thursday that the investigation's findings were a reason for him to reiterate apologies “for the systematic and widespread extreme violence on the part of the Dutch side in those years and the consistent way previous Cabinets looked away.”

“I would like to make a deep apology on behalf of the Dutch government to the people of Indonesia today,” Rutte said.

He added that apologies also were owed to “everybody in our country who has had to live with the consequences of the colonial war in Indonesia, often right up until today.”

Court cases initiated by relatives and survivors of Dutch military atrocities put pressure on the government in recent years to reassess military actions during the independence conflict.

A previous Dutch report, from 1969, acknowledged “violent excesses” in Indonesia but argued that Dutch troops were conducting a “police action” often incited by guerrilla warfare and terror attacks targeting perceived opponents of independence.

The findings published Thursday painted a far bleaker picture of the Dutch troops actions.

“During the war, the Dutch armed forces used extreme violence on a frequent and structural basis, in the form of extrajudicial executions, ill-treatment and torture, detention under inhumane conditions, the torching of houses and villages, the theft and destruction of property and food supplies, disproportionate air raids and artillery shelling, and what were often random mass arrests and mass internment,” the research project said in a statement.

It also implicated the military's political paymasters.

“The Dutch armed forces as an institution were responsible for the violence used, including the extreme violence. However, they operated in close consultation with and under the responsibility of the Dutch government,” the researchers found.

A representative of the Netherlands Veterans Institute criticized the findings.

“The results of the investigation evoke a feeling of discomfort and concern in me, because veterans who served in the former Dutch East Indies are collectively placed in the suspect's dock thanks to unsubstantiated conclusions,” the institute's director, Paul Hoefsloot, said in a written statement.

Hans van Griensven, chairman of another Dutch veterans' organization, told national broadcaster NOS that the violence was “not as pervasive as is now being suggested.”

	<p>"Of course, things went wrong, as they do in every war," Van Griensven added. "But, in general, there was also humanitarian help, food was distributed, infrastructure built up. That is not discussed" in the findings.</p> <p>The research project, partially funded by the Dutch government, is part of a broader reckoning with the Netherlands' colonial past. Last year, the mayor of Amsterdam apologized for the city's involvement in the slave trade.</p> <p>The national Rijks Museum last week opened an exhibition looking at Indonesia's war of independence.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/17 Russia-backed rebels a thorn in Ukraine
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/explainer-russia-backed-rebels-thorn-ukraines-side-82954667
GIST	<p>MOSCOW -- Amid fears of a Russian invasion of Ukraine, tensions have also soared in the country's east, where Ukrainian forces are locked in a long conflict with Russia-backed separatists.</p> <p>More than 14,000 people have been killed in nearly eight years of fighting, and a sharp increase in skirmishes Thursday raised concern that Moscow could use the situation as a pretext for an incursion.</p> <p>Here is a look at the state of affairs in the rebel-controlled territories in eastern Ukraine:</p> <p>SEPARATIST REBELLION</p> <p>When Ukraine's Moscow-friendly president was driven from office by mass protests in February 2014, Russia responded by annexing Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula. It then threw its weight behind an insurgency in the mostly Russian-speaking east, known as Donbas.</p> <p>In April 2014, Russia-backed rebels seized government buildings in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, proclaimed the creation of "people's republics" there and battled Ukrainian troops and volunteer battalions.</p> <p>The following month, the separatist regions held a popular vote to declare independence and make a bid to become part of Russia. Moscow hasn't accepted the motion, in the hope of using the regions as a tool to keep Ukraine in its orbit and prevent it from joining NATO.</p> <p>Ukraine and the West accused Russia of backing the rebels with troops and weapons. Moscow denied that, saying any Russians who fought in the east were volunteers.</p> <p>Amid ferocious battles involving tanks, heavy artillery and warplanes, Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 was shot down over eastern Ukraine on July 17, 2014, killing all 298 people aboard. An international probe concluded that the passenger jet was downed by a Russia-supplied missile from the rebel-controlled territory, but Moscow denied any involvement.</p> <p>PEACE AGREEMENTS</p> <p>After a massive defeat of Ukrainian troops in the battle of Ilovaisk in August 2014, envoys from Kyiv, the rebels and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe signed a truce in the Belarusian capital of Minsk in September 2014.</p> <p>The document envisaged an OSCE-observed cease-fire, a pullback of all foreign fighters, an exchange of prisoners and hostages, an amnesty for the rebels and a promise that separatist regions could have a degree of self-rule.</p> <p>The deal quickly collapsed and large-scale fighting resumed, leading to another major defeat for Ukrainian forces at Debaltsevo in January-February of 2015.</p>

France and Germany brokered another peace agreement, which was signed in Minsk in February 2015 by representatives of Ukraine, Russia and the rebels. It envisaged a new cease-fire, a pullback of heavy weapons and a series of moves toward a political settlement. A declaration in support of the deal was signed by the leaders of Russia, Ukraine, France and Germany.

FROZEN CONFLICT

The 2015 peace deal was a major diplomatic coup for the Kremlin, obliging Ukraine to grant special status to the separatist regions, allowing them to create their own police force and have a say in appointing local prosecutors and judges. It also envisaged that Ukraine could only regain control over the roughly 200-kilometer (125-mile) border with Russia in rebel regions after they get self-rule and hold OSCE-monitored local elections — balloting that would almost certainly keep pro-Moscow rebels in power there.

Many Ukrainians see it as a betrayal of national interests and its implementation has stalled.

The Minsk document helped end full-scale fighting, but the situation has remained tense and regular skirmishes have continued along the tense line of contact.

With the Minsk deal effectively stalled, Moscow's hope to use rebel regions to directly influence Ukraine's politics has failed, but the frozen conflict has drained Kyiv's resources and effectively stymied its goal of joining NATO — which is enshrined in the Ukrainian constitution.

Moscow also has worked to secure its hold on the rebel regions by handing out more than 720,000 Russian passports to roughly one-fifth of their population of about 3.6 million. It has provided economic and financial assistance to the separatist territories, but the aid has been insufficient to alleviate the massive damage from fighting and shore up the economy. The Donbas region accounted for about 16% of Ukraine's Gross Domestic Product before the conflict.

EFFORTS TO REVIVE PEACE DEAL

Amid soaring tensions over the Russian troop concentration near Ukraine, France and Germany have undertaken renewed efforts to encourage compliance with the 2015 deal, in the hope that it could help defuse the standoff.

Facing calls from Berlin and Paris for its implementation, Ukrainian officials have strengthened criticism of the Minsk deal and warned that it could lead to the country's demise.

Two rounds of talks in Paris and Berlin between presidential envoys from Russia, Ukraine, France and Germany have yielded no progress.

Amid the deadlock in talks, the lower house of Russian parliament this week urged Russian President Vladimir Putin to recognize the independence of Donetsk and Luhansk. Putin signaled, however, that he wasn't inclined to make the move that would effectively shatter the Minsk deal.

ESCALATION OF HOSTILITIES

Ukraine and the rebels accused each other Thursday of intensive shelling along the line of contact in Donetsk and Luhansk.

Separatist authorities claimed that Ukraine mounted a “large-scale provocation” and said they returned fire.

Ukraine denied opening fire and said the separatists were shelling government-controlled areas with heavy artillery and mortars. The Ukrainian military command charged that some shells hit a kindergarten in Stanytsia Luhanska, wounding two civilians, and cut power supply to half of the town.

	Yasar Halit Cevik, head of the OSCE monitoring mission, said it reported 500 explosions along the contact line between Wednesday evening and 11:20 am Thursday. Cevik told the United Nations Security Council that the tension appeared to be easing after that with about 30 explosions reported, adding “it is critically important to de-escalate immediately.”
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HEADLINE	02/17 Avocado price rise; Mexico growers hurt?
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/experts-avocado-price-rise-damage-mexican-producers-82957225
GIST	<p>MEXICO CITY -- Experts say you may be paying more for your avocado toast in the short term, and the effects of the U.S. temporary ban on imports of the fruit is already being felt by avocado pickers in Mexico.</p> <p>Mexico is negotiating security guarantees for U.S. inspectors who certify Mexican avocados for export. The inspections were halted last week after one of the U.S. inspectors was threatened in the western state of Michoacan, where growers are routinely subject to extortion by drug cartels.</p> <p>The U.S. Department of Agriculture released more details Thursday on what the threat involved. It said in a statement that an inspector had received a threat “against him and his family.”</p> <p>The inspector had “questioned the integrity of a certain shipment, and refused to certify it based on concrete issues,” according to USDA statement. The inspectors are in Mexico to certify that Mexican avocados aren't carrying pests that could harm California avocado orchards.</p> <p>But only one state in Mexico, Michoacan, is certified as pest-free and able to export avocados to the U.S. market. There have been frequent reports that some packers in Mexico are buying avocados from other, non-certified states, and trying to pass them off as being from Michoacan.</p> <p>But it is honest growers and their employees who are suffering the consequences.</p> <p>Avocado pickers stood on a roadside this week outside the city of Uruapan, Michoacan, asking for donations after they lost their work. Holding up signs saying “Voluntary donations” and “We make our living off avocado picking,” they waited for motorists to drop spare change into buckets they held.</p> <p>“Since last Wednesday we haven't picked anything,” said one of the workers, who refused to give his name because of the widespread violence in the state. “In the meantime, you die of hunger.”</p> <p>While avocados that were already inspected can still be shipped north, there were signs Thursday that supplies will tighten and companies that import avocados may have to look beyond Mexico, which currently supplies about 80% of U.S. imports of the fruit.</p> <p>“I think it is going to increase prices in the United States, not now because there is still avocado in transit, but I anticipate that in a week or 10 days we will have a price spike,” said Miguel Gómez, professor of applied economics and management in the Cornell SC Johnson College of Business.</p> <p>Jack Hartung, the chief financial officer of the Chipotle restaurant chain, said in a statement that “we are working closely with our suppliers to navigate through this challenge. Our sourcing partners currently have several weeks of inventory available, so we’ll continue to closely monitor the situation and adjust our plans accordingly.”</p> <p>Gómez expects any shortage would be short-lived.</p> <p>“I think that the the disruption in the market will be very short now because (avocado from) Peru is going to come in late March, early April, and I’m sure they are going to do everything it takes to start shipping avocados earlier and perhaps in mid-March,” Gómez said.</p>

Peru, Colombia and Chile already ship avocados to the United States, but in quantities that are only a tiny fraction of Mexico's production. That may change.

"I was talking with a few buyers of avocado domestically, and on toward the future. They they know they need to diversify suppliers," said Gómez. "The issue is that they realized that it would be very risky to depend on a single source.

The avocado growers association and Michoacan state officials have been holding meetings this week with U.S. officials to work out security guarantees for U.S. inspectors.

"We are working to restore avocado exports as soon as possible," wrote Michoacan Gov. Alfredo Ramírez Bedolla.

But in the meantime, avocado growers in Michoacan have been left in uncertainty; avocados can be left on the trees for a certain amount of time, but already-harvested fruit has to be shipped quickly.

"We have the uncertainty; if it (the export production) is going to go into the domestic market, all into Mexico, prices will drop," said avocado buyer and distributor José Manuel Garcia Tovar. "So we are in a situation in which growers may or may not want to harvest."

It also remains to be seen how U.S. consumers will react if they start seeing prices rise. While there is concern about the deforestation and violence that have resulted from the avocado boom in Michoacan, the fruit has become a staple in the United States, where per capita consumption of avocados tripled since 2001 to 8 pounds per person in 2018.

"The moment you hit somebody's avocado toast at brunch, that's like hitting the very heart of many American families that rely on that Sunday brunch, right? So all of a sudden, we're getting kind of questions as to ... where are the priorities here?" said Desirée LeClercq, a professor of employment law at Cornell's School of Industrial and Labor Relations.

That raises the issue of whether Americans would be willing to pay more for avocados not associated with violence, drug cartels or deforestation.

"It's requiring Americans to really ask themselves, do they want to pay more to have a quality product or do they want to kind of look the other way and be able to slice their toast accordingly?" said LeClercq. "And I think that consumers are becoming more educated on how these products are made. But whether or not that's going to trickle into consumer behavior, I think has yet to be seen."

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HEADLINE	02/17 Puerto Rico protests; seeking higher wages
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/protests-grow-puerto-rico-amid-demands-higher-wages-82973841
GIST	<p>SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico -- Four men walked to the parking lot before dawn, then sat down blocking the entrance and linked their arms to await the arrival of hundreds of federal and state employees for the work day.</p> <p>Protesting years without pay raises, the four employees of Puerto Rico's Authority of Roads and Transportation refused to budge. A specialized police unit finally moved in to remove them, and as they were put in handcuffs, one of the men yelled: "Fair salary! Give us what you owe us!"</p> <p>It's a cry that has echoed across Puerto Rico in recent weeks as government employees and supporters take to the streets, emboldened by thousands of public school teachers who abandoned classrooms in early February to demand raises and better pensions.</p>

Protests are multiplying, with union leaders calling another demonstration for Friday, and social unrest is posing one of the biggest challenges for Gov. Pedro Pierluisi a year into his term.

“The people kicked the U.S. military out of Vieques. They kicked out a governor. We can make this happen,” said Abner Dumey, who teaches history in the northern town of Naranjito.

Legislators are the only public workers who have an automatic cost-of-living increase for their salaries. The U.S. territory's other public employees have not gotten pay raises in more than a decade — sometimes two — as the cost of living rises and the island fights to emerge from a lengthy economic crisis and a government bankruptcy in the aftermath of deadly hurricanes, earthquakes and the pandemic.

Power and water bills are nearly 60% higher in Puerto Rico than the U.S. average. Groceries are 18% more expensive than on the mainland, although health care and housing costs, among others, are lower, according to the island's Institute of Statistics.

Marcia Rivera, an economist and sociologist whose research focuses largely on poverty and inequality, said government workers are grappling with rising prices while getting the same salaries they had in 2008.

“They're fed up,” she said.

Many public employees work one or two additional jobs to make ends meet.

Carlos Javier Vázquez, for one, is a paramedic in the mountain town of Barranquitas, and he also teaches emergency medicine and operates an ambulance company to help support his wife and four children. It's a life that is exhausting and not sustainable, he said.

But with paramedics in Puerto Rico earning a base salary of \$1,725 a month, he said he has no choice. “It's extremely difficult to survive on that.”

In an attempt to quell the demonstrations, the governor promised teachers a \$1,000 monthly increase just days after 70% of them walked out of their classrooms in protest earlier this month. He expanded the offer to school principals, regional superintendents and others just days later.

Shortly afterward, he promised a \$500 monthly increase for firefighters and a 30% raise for paramedics.

Pierluisi's actions only fanned anger among other government employees, with some demanding their own pay increases as others fume over the governor's recent comment that no one is forced to become a firefighter or police officer.

A problem is that all those increases promised by Pierluisi rely on federal funds that expire in upcoming years, and many people did not believe the governor when he promised to find local funds to make the increases permanent.

That promise also worried economists as Puerto Rican leaders try to restructure a \$70 billion public debt following decades of mismanagement, corruption and excessive borrowing that forced the government to declare the largest municipal bankruptcy in U.S. history in 2017, just months before Hurricane Maria battered the island.

“It's highly irresponsible,” said Antonio Fernós, a Puerto Rico economist and university professor who believes the government is unable to make the increases permanent. “It's Public Finance 101 of what not to do.”

Fernós said one of the key things that made the government go bankrupt was to use temporary funding for fixed costs.

“They certainly haven’t learned their lesson yet,” he said. “Puerto Rico is the poster child for government finances mismanagement. This is the worst timing for all wage earners.”

Rivera, the poverty researcher, agreed, saying no salary increase should be authorized without having a financial policy in place. She added that the governor should not manage affairs by responding to yelling.

“He has opened Pandora’s box,” she said. “He cannot meet all the demand that he himself generated.”

Pierluisi’s announcement came just weeks after the federal control board that oversees Puerto Rico’s finances approved a fiscal plan that contained smaller pay increases for teachers, firefighters and other employees. It said the government’s financial state did not allow for more.

The governor has said a new compensation plan will go into effect next year and bring higher wages for thousands of public employees, yet he also says he won’t be able to raise the pay of all public workers.

“I obviously cannot please everyone,” he said Wednesday. “That is impossible.”

That same day, he announced a 30% pay increase for dispatchers and medical emergency technicians including paramedics. On Thursday, he announced a \$500 monthly increase for prison officers.

And while economists are warning about the lack of financing, union leaders say the promised increases are only a good first step. They say more is needed and complain that the government is cutting pension benefits and raising the retirement age.

Wanda Ramos, a special education teacher in Caguas, said the pension she is to get upon retirement is being cut from \$2,400 a month to \$960. She said she struggles now after not getting a raise in 12 years.

“I can only buy the essentials. I never have a full fridge,” Ramos said, adding that a hefty portion of her salary goes to paying her daughter’s college education.

Migdalia Santiago, who is also a special education teacher, said she faces similar struggles.

“Pay the lights, you don’t pay water,” she said.

Public school teachers in Puerto Rico earn a base salary of \$1,750 a month and are demanding a minimum of \$3,500. Meanwhile, firefighters earn a base salary of \$1,500 a month and are seeking \$2,500 and an improved pension plan.

Union leader José Tirado said firefighters previously could retire at age 55 after 30 years of service with up to 75% of their salary. Now, the minimum retirement age is 58 and they get only 33% of their salary, he said.

“The quality of life, with those salaries they earn, is a misery,” Tirado said.

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HEADLINE	02/17 Saudi Arabia keeps lid on oil output
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/saudi-arabia-lid-oil-output-us-gas-prices-82958855
GIST	<p>DUBAI, United Arab Emirates -- Saudi Arabia is signaling it isn't willing to pump more oil and won't push for changes to an agreement with Russia and other producers that has kept a lid on oil production levels.</p> <p>This has Washington concerned as gasoline prices rise and tensions with Russia over Ukraine fuel market uncertainty.</p>

The Biden administration dispatched Brett McGurk, the National Security Council's Middle East coordinator, and the State Department's energy envoy, Amos Hochstein, to Riyadh on Wednesday to talk about a range of issues — chief among them the ongoing war in Yemen and global energy supplies.

Asked by reporters in Washington whether the U.S. officials were also urging Saudi Arabia to pump more crude to alleviate high oil prices, White House press secretary Jen Psaki said she did not have more details on the meeting.

A White House official said the two U.S. officials had not asked the Saudis to increase oil production at their meetings in Riyadh. The person insisted on anonymity.

On Thursday, Emily Horne, the spokesperson for the White House National Security Council, said the officials discussed a “collaborative approach” with the Saudis to manage potential market pressures stemming from a possible Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Two Saudi officials told The Associated Press the Saudi energy minister informed the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, or OPEC, of the kingdom's commitment to the group's current roadmap of cautious monthly increases. They spoke anonymously because they were not authorized to brief journalists.

King Salman also said as much in a call last week with President Joe Biden. According to a Saudi readout of the call, the king highlighted the “the importance of maintaining the agreement” that is in place between OPEC, the oil cartel led by Saudi, and Russia.

The Saudi and Russian-led alliance, known as OPEC+, calls for gradual increases to oil production as the world continues to emerge from the pandemic, but geopolitical events have been rapidly evolving and driving market volatility.

Higher prices at the pump pose a threat to Democrats at the polls in upcoming midterm elections. Biden has warned that gas prices could rise even higher if Russian President Vladimir Putin invades Ukraine.

Benchmark crude is trading at around \$95 a barrel, its highest level in eight years. AAA says the current U.S. national average for a gallon of regular gasoline costs around \$3.50 — a 40% increase from its average of \$2.50 at this time last year.

During a CNN forum in October, Biden said prices were rising because “of the supply being withheld by OPEC.” He said that while there's a lot of negotiation going on about the cost of gas, “there's a lot of Middle Eastern folks who want to talk to me.”

“I’m not sure I’m going to talk to them. But the point is, it’s about gas production,” he added.

His remarks were widely interpreted as a swipe at Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who oversees the kingdom's major policy decisions and day-to-day affairs.

Saudi Arabia has the ability to produce some 12 million barrels a day, but its output is around 10 million barrels a day in line with the OPEC+ curbs made during the coronavirus pandemic.

The Biden administration has emphasized U.S. strategic interests with Saudi Arabia, a departure from the Trump administration's personal relationship with the crown prince that was cultivated by advisor Jared Kushner.

Early on in his presidency, Biden reversed a terrorism designation of Yemen's Houthi rebels that a Saudi-led coalition is battling — a decision he's now being lobbied to reconsider. He also declassified an intelligence report that concluded Prince Mohammed likely approved the operation that killed Saudi writer Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul in 2018.

Throughout his presidency, Biden has circumvented speaking directly with the crown prince, choosing instead to hold calls with King Salman, the prince's 86-year-old father.

The OPEC+ group has consistently rebuffed pressure from Biden to pump significantly more oil, deciding instead to stick with cautious monthly increases. The higher oil prices are a boon to the economies of both Saudi Arabia and Russia as Moscow faces possible Western sanctions over Ukraine.

The Wall Street Journal reported that at an energy forum in Riyadh on Wednesday, Saudi Energy Minister Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman rejected calls to pump more oil and said renegotiating quotas among OPEC members risked stoking more volatility in oil markets. The Intercept first reported that Saudi Arabia had rejected a Biden plea to increase oil production.

At the energy forum in Riyadh, Hochstein, the State Department's energy envoy, stressed "energy security cannot be taken for granted."

"We have seen a rapid rise in price and today having a significant amount of risk, of geopolitical risk, priced into our markets," he said at a livestreamed International Energy Forum symposium. High oil prices and high inflation are cyclical and affect each other, he added.

Oil producers, he said, need to "make sure that the supply is there to meet the demand" so that prices do not continue to strain the U.S. economy and wider economic recovery.

Speaking at the same energy forum, the head of the International Energy Agency called on OPEC+ producers to close what he said is a 1 million barrel-per-day gap between their stated targets and actual output. The IEA says Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates could help stabilize prices if they pumped more oil.

IEA Executive Director Fatih Birol called on OPEC+ producers to "provide more volume to the markets" to reduce price volatility that is burdening households.

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HEADLINE	02/17 Ukraine separatists shell nursery school
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/tensions-rise-ukraine-russian-backed-separatist-shelling-hits/story?id=82962555
GIST	<p>LVIV, Ukraine -- Tensions have jumped in eastern Ukraine as Russian-controlled separatists there shelled a nursery in Ukrainian government-held territory and warned of escalation, amid concerns that Russia may be looking to build a pretext to launch an invasion.</p> <p>Mortar rounds fired by the separatists struck kindergarten number 21 in the village of Stanytsa Luhansk on Thursday morning close to the frontline with Ukrainian troops, injuring three adults, according to Ukraine's military. Video filmed by Ukrainian soldiers showed a hole blown in the school's wall. Twenty children had to be evacuated but were unhurt, Ukraine's armed forces said.</p> <p>Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy accused the Russian-backed separatists of "provocative shelling" and as the United States warned Russia is now preparing to launch an invasion in the coming days. President Joe Biden on Thursday told reporters "every indicator we have is they're prepared to go into Ukraine, and "we have reason to believe they are engaged in a false flag operation to have an excuse to go in."</p> <p>NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg also said he was concerned Russia "is trying to stage a pretext for an armed attack against Ukraine."</p> <p>The firing occurred at the same time as the Russian-controlled separatists accused Ukraine of "large-scale" shelling onto their territory and warned of a "substantial worsening" of the situation along the front line.</p>

The self-declared Peoples Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk on Thursday issued “emergency statements” claiming Ukrainian troops had fired onto civilian areas in nine villages, including with heavy caliber mortars. Rodion Miroshnik, a political advisor for the Lugansk ‘republic’, accused Ukraine of ordering a “massive provocation.”

Ukrainian soldiers stand guard outside the building after the reported shelling of a kindergarten. Read More
The two unrecognized statelets control part of Ukraine’s Donbas regions, after Russia helped create them during fighting in 2014 and they remain heavily dependent on Moscow and its troops, which are covertly stationed there.

For weeks, the separatist leadership and Russian state media have accused Ukraine of preparing to mount an offensive against the separatist territories. Western officials and independent experts worry Russia may be laying the groundwork for a pretext it could use to justify a military intervention should it choose to attack.

This week, Russia opened a war crimes investigation into separatist claims to have found mass graves, supposedly containing the victims of alleged Ukrainian atrocities. Russian President Vladimir Putin told a press conference on Tuesday “genocide” was taking place in eastern Ukraine.

At least 14,000 people have died during the eight-year conflict in Ukraine, many of the victims died following indiscriminate artillery fire by both sides. However, no evidence has emerged of large-scale massacres or genocide as Russia claims.

Late Wednesday night, Russia's mission to the United Nations circulated a document that alleged Ukraine had committed large-scale war crimes in the eastern regions ahead of a U.N. Security Council session on the war.

U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken in the U.N. council session Thursday accused Russia of planning to manufacture a pretext for an imminent invasion of Ukraine, singling out the mass grave claims and saying Moscow might also stage phony drone strikes or chemical or biological weapons attacks.

Russia might try to claim such an event as “ethnic cleansing or a genocide,” Blinken said. He said that would make a “mockery of a concept that we in this chamber do not take lightly.”

“Nor do I take lightly, based on my family history,” said Blinken, a reference to his stepfather who survived the Holocaust.

Blinken said the U.S.’ information now indicates that Russia’s build up of forces near Ukraine means they “are preparing to launch an attack against Ukraine in the coming days.”

He warned that after spreading false claims about a Ukrainian attack on the separatist, Russia might convene high-level emergency meeting to address them, after which it would launch an assault. Blinken said the Russian plan would see aerial bombardment across Ukraine, backed up by massive cyberattacks, as Russian tanks and troops moved on cities, including the capital Kyiv.

"Here today, we are laying it out in great detail with a hope that by sharing what we know with the world, we can influence Russia to abandon the path of war and choose a different path while there's still time," Blinken said.

Russian officials have dismissed the U.S. accusations as “hysteria” and pointed out that a date announced for the possible Russian attack this week, Feb. 16, had passed without anything materializing.

"We have long ago clarified everything and explained everything, and the announced date of the so-called invasion is behind us, so therefore, my advice to you is not present yourself in an awkward situation," Russia’s Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Vershinin told Blinken during the UN council meeting.

The Feb. 16 was reported as a possible day for a Russian attack after U.S. officials privately briefed NATO allies last week, but U.S. officials have said the reason they identified it was because of information Putin has ordered his military to be ready to go from that date.

Russia's parliament earlier this week passed a law appealing to Putin to recognize the separatist regions as independent from Ukraine. The step would be a major escalation, opening the path for Russia to formally annex them as it did Crimea in 2014.

But Putin so far has signaled he will not act on the appeal, saying on Tuesday that Russia will continue to work through the so-called Minsk agreements. The 2015 peace deal aimed at end the conflict in eastern Ukraine. Russia recognizing the self-declared republics would amount to it exiting the Minsk deal.

Russia's military this week has claimed to be moving some of its forces back from near Ukraine and its Defense Ministry on Thursday insisted again some troops were now returning to base. A spokesman said, the first units from Russia's western and southern military districts, had already reached their home bases far from the border and more were moving there now.

But NATO countries and Ukraine, as well as independent analysts, have said so far there is no evidence of Russia is withdrawing substantial forces and that in reality it is continuing its build up.

Huge Russian exercises are continuing in neighboring Belarus and the Black Sea, scheduled to go on until Feb. 20, after which Russia has said its forces will leave. A Russian deputy foreign minister on Thursday said it was time for western countries "to calm down," saying the exercises would soon end.

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HEADLINE	02/17 Report: lead in Philadelphia schools' water
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/lead-contamination-found-philadelphia-schools-water-report/story?id=82958152
GIST	<p>An environmental group said Philadelphia's school system needs to re-examine and rework its water pipes after a study found major lead contamination in school buildings.</p> <p>The report, which was released by the PennPIRG Education Fund, the PennEnvironment Research & Policy Center and the Black Church Center for Justice and Equality, found that 61% of outlets tested across 65 schools were tainted with lead.</p> <p>These included water fountains, bathroom sinks and kitchen sinks, according to the report.</p> <p>"The extent of lead contamination in our schools' drinking water is unacceptable," Emma Horst-Martz, an advocate for the PennPIRG Education Fund, said in a statement.</p> <p>The study used public data on water testing from the school district.</p> <p>The report's authors said many school buildings still have lead in their pipes and that may have led to the contamination.</p> <p>The authors also released an interactive map showing the amount of contamination from each school that was surveyed.</p> <p>Longstreth Elementary School had 49 outlets with lead contamination, the most within the schools surveyed, the report said.</p> <p>The School District of Philadelphia released a statement contending the report was "not an accurate reflection of the water quality that students and staff in our District are accessing each and every day."</p> <p>The district said it has a system in place to prevent students and staff from drinking contaminated water.</p>

	<p>"In the event that a water outlet tests at or above 10 ppb (parts per billion), the City of Philadelphia's required threshold for school drinking water ... the outlet is immediately shut down," the district said in a statement. "The District closes these outlets, both because it is required under City and EPA regulations, and to prevent students or staff from using or ingesting contaminated water."</p> <p>The researchers said the city can take a few steps to curb the problem, including installing hydration systems that have filters and dispensing water into water bottles. They also recommended that filters be installed in all water fountains, taps in classrooms and kitchen sinks.</p> <p>"It's time for district officials to address this threat once and for all," David Masur, the executive director of the PennEnvironment Research & Policy Center said in a statement.</p> <p>The district said it has installed more than 1,320 hydration systems in school buildings and aims to install more in the future.</p> <p>"These purified drinking sources are tested and have consistently shown lead levels which are safer than that required by city regulations. The district will continue its existing efforts to place hydration stations within easy access to all staff and students," the district said.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/17 Austin to pay \$10M for 2 injured protesters
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/austin-pay-10-million-protesters-injured-police-george/story?id=82961856
GIST	<p>The City of Austin has agreed to pay a combined \$10 million to two demonstrators who were injured during by police during the 2020 racial justice protests that took place in the city.</p> <p>Two protesters, Justin Howell and Anthony Evans, were severely injured when police used "less-lethal" ammunition as a form of crowd control during protests that took place after the deaths of George Floyd and Michael Ramos, who was killed by an Austin Police officer, according to two civil lawsuits filed against the city.</p> <p>Members of the Austin City Council voted Thursday to approve the settlements to Anthony Evans, who will be paid \$2 million, and Justin Howell, who will receive \$8 million, marking the largest settlement amount ever paid for a use-of-force case in Austin, ABC Austin affiliate KVUE reported.</p> <p>Howell was critically injured on May 31, 2020, when an officer shot him with "less-lethal" ammunition in downtown Austin, then-Police Chief Brian Manley told KVUE the next day. Howell, who was a 20-year-old political science major at Texas State University at the time, suffered a fractured skull. He filed a civil lawsuit against the city in the Western District of Texas in August 2021.</p> <p>Evans was peacefully protesting at the Austin Police Department headquarters on June 6, 2020, when he was hit with bean bags and foam bullets deployed by officers, KVUE reported. Evans spent his 26th birthday undergoing surgery on his face, telling the station that his jaw looked like he "got hit by a car." Evans underwent two surgeries, had a metal wire placed in his mouth for six weeks and now has a permanent titanium plate in his jaw, he told KVUE.</p> <p>Evans filed his lawsuit against the city in the Western District of Texas in October 2020.</p> <p>In a statement to KVUE, a City of Austin spokesperson said the city was settling lawsuits filed by two individuals who "suffered significant injuries" in the protests. The "significant dollar amounts" included in the settlement stem from the plaintiffs' "need for ongoing and long-term care," the spokesperson said.</p> <p>"We have reviewed the totality of the circumstances surrounding the protests, and we believe it is in the best interest of these plaintiffs and the City of Austin to resolve these cases now," the statement read. "We have other claims and lawsuits that have been filed as a result of injuries during the protests, and we will review each of those matters individually."</p>

	<p>Eleven Austin officers were disciplined for their actions during the protests after Manley completed his review of all known complaints and incidents involving officers during the demonstrations.</p> <p>The Austin Police Department was not adequately prepared for the size of the crowd during the 2020 protests and did not anticipate the injuries that would occur from the "less-lethal" rounds, Austin Police Chief Joseph Chacon said in a statement. The department now prohibits less-lethal ammunition for crowd control.</p> <p>"I understand the Council's decision to settle these two cases now, and our hearts go out to these two individuals who received serious injuries during the May 2020 protests," Chacon said.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/17 Severe weather alert over 30 states, 180M
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/180-million-americans-high-alert-severe-weather/story?id=82954946
GIST	<p>Americans in at least 30 states are on high alert for snow, ice, flooding and tornadoes as storms sweep across the eastern half of the country.</p> <p>They could bring damaging winds across the Deep South Thursday into Friday.</p> <p>Excessive rain could lead to flooding across the Ohio Valley and the interior Northeast and ice jams are possible in the eastern Great Lakes.</p> <p>Winter weather is expected from Wichita to Detroit. Half a foot of snow and icy conditions are expected through late Thursday.</p> <p>A tornado watch is in place for Arkansas, Louisiana, Tennessee and Mississippi through 6 p.m. Central Time.</p> <p>A few tornadoes are likely in addition to wind gusts up to 75 mph.</p> <p>Very heavy rain and flood threats extend into Kentucky, Illinois, Indiana and Ohio.</p> <p>Heavy snow is falling Thursday afternoon from Wichita to Chicago, with over 9 inches of snow already reported in the Kansas City area.</p> <p>Storms will continue across Tennessee and Mississippi Thursday evening and severe weather will stretch from Louisville to Nashville to Birmingham.</p> <p>Heavy rain and flood threats will move east across the Ohio Valley and into the interior Northeast, from Cincinnati to Buffalo.</p> <p>Chicago could potentially see between 1 to 4 inches of snow and 4 to 8 inches of snow in Detroit by Thursday night.</p> <p>A storm moves into the Northeast late Thursday night through early Friday morning, with rain likely.</p> <p>Heavy downpours are expected overnight, with possible thunder as the storm moves through the I-95 corridor in the early morning.</p> <p>High wind warnings are in place along the coast from Long Island to Cape Cod, where gusts could exceed 60 miles per hour. The winds could cause damage and power outages by Friday morning.</p> <p>Parts of the Denver metro area got more than a half a foot of snow overnight Wednesday into Thursday, causing slick roads and closing parts of I-70.</p>

HEADLINE	02/17 Government shutdown averted
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/senate-averts-government-shutdown/story?id=82964510
GIST	<p>Senators narrowly avoided a government shutdown Thursday evening, passing a short-term funding bill one day before funds were set to lapse.</p> <p>The bill, which continues funding at current levels, will keep the federal government operating until March 11. Congressional leaders are hopeful that by that time, negotiators will have ironed out an agreement on a yearlong package of funding bills.</p> <p>Leaders on both sides of the aisle have assured the public for several days that the government would not shut down on Friday, but negotiations came down to the wire as GOP lawmakers looked to use the budget bill as an opportunity to challenge Democrats' COVID-19 mandates.</p> <p>Challenges to pandemic mandates are becoming increasingly popular among Republican lawmakers, who are looking to capitalize on growing fatigue over COVID-19 across the country.</p> <p>But blocking such amendments proved challenging for Democrats, who stalled consideration of the short-term funding bill because several of their members are not currently in Washington. Sens. Dianne Feinstein of California and Mark Kelly of Arizona are out of town managing family emergencies. And Sen. Ben Ray Lujan of New Mexico is recovering from a stroke.</p> <p>Ultimately some Republicans -- Sens. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, Richard Burr of North Carolina, Mitt Romney of Utah and Jim Inhofe of Oklahoma -- were also missing from the chamber, evening out the numbers and allowing Democrats to move the vote forward.</p> <p>If any amendment had been successful, the funding bill would have had to be returned to the House, which is currently on recess and would not have been able to return to pass a modified version of the legislation before government funding expired Friday evening.</p> <p>Neither of the two COVID-19 mandate amendments ultimately passed, but they did receive support from nearly every Republican in the chamber.</p> <p>One amendment, offered by Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, would have revoked federal funds for schools that left mask mandates in place for children. The other, led by Sen. Mike Lee, R-Utah, would have ended the federal vaccine mandate.</p> <p>Another amendment, which would have required the United States to balance its budget, also failed.</p> <p>Lawmakers have already passed multiple short-term funding extensions to buy key negotiators in both chambers additional time to agree on a massive bill to keep the government funded through the end of the fiscal year.</p> <p>Leaders say they're narrowing in on a deal, but no formal agreement has been announced.</p>
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Cyber Awareness

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HEADLINE	02/17 Nigeria police arrest 29 in online crackdown
SOURCE	https://therecord.media/nigerian-police-arrests-29-in-online-fraud-crackdown/
GIST	Nigeria's Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), the agency that enforces local laws against online fraud, announced Thursday that it arrested 29 people allegedly involved in "internet and

	<p>other related fraud activities.”</p> <p>The arrests were made around the city of Offa in Kwara State by EFCC’s Ilorin Zonal Command, who also seized mobile phones, laptops, and cars, according to a news release on the EFCC’s website.</p> <p>The agency said the arrests were the result of “credible intelligence received by the Command on the activities of the suspects.” Some of those arrested “have confessed to the crime,” the EFCC wrote, and will be charged at the end of the investigation.</p> <p>The EFCC has made a number of similar crackdowns in recent years, sometimes in collaboration with law enforcement agencies from other countries—including arresting 167 in 2019 as part of an international action known as Operation reWired and 11 people in January of this year in relation to an Interpol investigation of the Silver Terrier cybercrime gang.</p> <p>Nigeria’s history with cybercrime goes back to the 1990s, but local cybercriminals have since evolved from targeting individual victims to being a more sophisticated underground economy that seeks larger paydays by compromising business emails systems to redirect funds or commit identity fraud to take out false loans and access to government benefits systems.</p> <p>Widespread poverty and increased economic insecurity during the pandemic have also left cybercrime as one of few options available to Nigerians who may have access to the internet, but are not able to find legitimate work that pays as well.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/17 Iranian hackers hit VMware Horizon servers
SOURCE	https://thehackernews.com/2022/02/iranian-hackers-targeting-vmware.html
GIST	<p>A "potentially destructive actor" aligned with the government of Iran is actively exploiting the well-known Log4j vulnerability to infect unpatched VMware Horizon servers with ransomware.</p> <p>Cybersecurity firm SentinelOne dubbed the group "TunnelVision" owing to their heavy reliance on tunneling tools, with overlaps in tactics observed to that of a broader group tracked under the moniker Phosphorus as well as Charming Kitten and Nemesis Kitten.</p> <p>"TunnelVision activities are characterized by wide-exploitation of 1-day vulnerabilities in target regions," SentinelOne researchers Amitai Ben Shushan Ehrlich and Yair Rigevsky said in a report, with the intrusions detected in the Middle East and the U.S.</p> <p>Also observed alongside Log4Shell is the exploitation of Fortinet FortiOS path traversal flaw (CVE-2018-13379) and the Microsoft Exchange ProxyShell vulnerability to gain initial access into the target networks for post-exploitation.</p> <p>"TunnelVision attackers have been actively exploiting the vulnerability to run malicious PowerShell commands, deploy backdoors, create backdoor users, harvest credentials and perform lateral movement," the researchers said.</p> <p>The PowerShell commands are used as a launchpad to download tools like Ngrok and run further commands by means of reverse shells that are employed to drop a PowerShell backdoor that's capable of gathering credentials and executing reconnaissance commands.</p> <p>SentinelOne also said it identified similarities in the mechanism used to execute the reverse web shell with another PowerShell-based implant called PowerLess that was disclosed by Cybereason researchers earlier this month.</p> <p>All through the activity, the threat actor is said to have utilized a GitHub repository known as "VmWareHorizon" under the username "protections20" to host the malicious payloads.</p>

	The cybersecurity company said it's associating the attacks to a separate Iranian cluster not because they are unrelated, but owing to the fact that "there is at present insufficient data to treat them as identical to any of the aforementioned attributions."
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HEADLINE	02/18 PseudoManuscript malware targets SKorea
SOURCE	https://thehackernews.com/2022/02/pseudomanuscript-malware-spreading-same.html
GIST	<p>Numerous Windows machines located in South Korea have been targeted by a botnet tracked as PseudoManuscript since at least May 2021 by employing the same delivery tactics of another malware called CryptBot.</p> <p>"PseudoManuscript is disguised as an installer that is similar to a form of CryptBot, and is being distributed," South Korean cybersecurity company AhnLab Security Emergency Response Center (ASEC) said in a report published today.</p> <p>"Not only is its file form similar to CryptBot, but it is also distributed via malicious sites exposed on the top search page when users search commercial software-related illegal programs such as Crack and Keygen," it added.</p> <p>According to ASEC, around 30 computers in the country are being consistently infected on a daily basis on average.</p> <p>PseudoManuscript was first documented by Russian cybersecurity firm Kaspersky in December 2021, when it disclosed details of a "mass-scale spyware attack campaign" infecting more than 35,000 computers in 195 countries globally.</p> <p>Targets of PseudoManuscript attacks, which it originally uncovered in June 2021, include a significant number of industrial and government organizations, including enterprises in the military-industrial complex and research laboratories, in Russia, India, and Brazil, among others.</p> <p>The main payload module is equipped with extensive and varied spying functionality that provides the attackers with virtually full control of the infected system. It includes stealing VPN connection details, recording audio with the microphone, and capturing clipboard contents and operating system event log data.</p> <p>Furthermore, PseudoManuscript can access a remote command-and-control server under the attacker's control to carry out various nefarious activities such as file download, execute arbitrary commands, log keypresses, and capture screenshots and videos of the screen.</p> <p>"As this malware is disguised as an illegal software installer and is distributed to random individuals via malicious sites, users must be careful not to download relevant programs," the researchers said. "As malicious files can also be registered to service and perform continuous malicious behaviors without the user knowing, periodic PC maintenance is necessary."</p>
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HEADLINE	02/18 Microsoft: 'ice phishing' threat on Web3
SOURCE	https://thehackernews.com/2022/02/microsoft-warns-of-ice-phishing-threat.html
GIST	<p>Microsoft has warned of emerging threats in the Web3 landscape, including "ice phishing" campaigns, as a surge in adoption of blockchain and DeFi technologies emphasizes the need to build security into the decentralized web while it's still in its early stages.</p> <p>The company's Microsoft 365 Defender Research Team called out various new avenues through which malicious actors may attempt to trick cryptocurrency users into giving up their private cryptographic keys and carry out unauthorized fund transfers.</p>

"One aspect that the immutable and public blockchain enables is complete transparency, so an attack can be observed and studied after it occurred," Christian Seifert, principal research manager at Microsoft's Security and Compliance group, [said](#). "It also allows assessment of the financial impact of attacks, which is challenging in traditional web2 phishing attacks."

The theft of the keys could be carried out in several ways, including impersonating wallet software, deploying malware on victims' devices, typosquatting legitimate smart contract front ends, and minting [rogue digital tokens](#) for [Airdrop scams](#).

Another technique involves what Microsoft calls "ice phishing." Rather than stealing a user's private keys, the method works by deceiving the target into "signing a transaction that delegates approval of the user's tokens to the attacker."

"Once the approval transaction has been signed, submitted, and mined, the spender can access the funds," Seifert elaborated. "In case of an 'ice phishing' attack, the attacker can accumulate approvals over a period of time and then drain all [the] victim's wallets quickly."

The [high-profile hack](#) of DeFi platform BadgerDAO, which came to light in early December 2021, was one such instance of ice phishing, wherein a maliciously injected snippet using a compromised API key enabled the adversary to siphon \$121 million in funds.

"The attacker deployed the worker script via a compromised API key that was created without the knowledge or authorization of Badger engineers," BadgerDAO [said](#). "The attacker(s) used this API access to periodically inject malicious code into the Badger application such that it only affected a subset of the user base."

The script was programmed such that it would intercept Web3 transactions from wallets over a certain balance and insert a request to transfer the victim's tokens to an address chosen by the attackers.

To mitigate threats affecting the blockchain technology, Microsoft is recommending users to [review and audit](#) the smart contracts for adequate incident response or emergency capabilities and periodically [reassess and revoke](#) token allowances.

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HEADLINE	02/17 Phishing top threat to healthcare
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/phishing-top-threat-to-us/
GIST	<p>New research by the Healthcare Information and Management Systems Society (HIMSS) has found phishing and ransomware attacks are the most significant security incidents impacting healthcare organizations of all types.</p> <p>The finding emerged from the <i>2021 HIMSS Healthcare Cybersecurity Survey</i> that questioned 167 healthcare cybersecurity professionals about security incidents their organizations had experienced in the past twelve months.</p> <p>Nearly half (45%) said the most significant security breach they had experienced in the previous twelve months was a phishing attack, while a further 17% named ransomware as their worst aggressor.</p> <p>Asked about the cause of their most significant breach, more than half (57%) said phishing was to blame. Negligent insider activity was named by 7% of respondents as the cause of the most significant security incident.</p> <p>While email-based phishing attacks accounted for most (71%) of the significant security breaches, 27% had suffered a significant vishing (voice phishing) incident and 21% said they had been the victim of a significant smishing (SMS phishing) attack.</p>

	<p>In 15% of attacks, the initial point of compromise occurred through social engineering. However, the most common route into an organization for attackers was phishing, which accounted for 71% of attacks.</p> <p>Other key findings were that human error was the cause of 19% of data breaches. A further 15% of breaches were pinned on the use of legacy software that is no longer supported.</p> <p>Asked about the impact of security breaches, 32% said breaches disrupted systems that impacted business operations. More than a quarter (26%) said security breaches disrupted IT systems, and 22% said security breaches resulted in data breaches or data leakage.</p> <p>Fewer respondents (21%) said security breaches impacted clinical care, and only 17% said the most significant security incident resulted in financial loss.</p> <p>HIMSS said: "The findings of the 2021 HIMSS Healthcare Cybersecurity Survey suggest that healthcare organizations still have significant challenges to overcome.</p> <p>"These barriers to progress include tight security budgets, growing legacy footprints and the growing volume of cyber-attacks and compromises."</p> <p>The society said that while basic security controls have not been fully implemented at many organizations, "perhaps the largest vulnerability is the human factor."</p>
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HEADLINE	02/18 FlexBooker data leak impacts millions
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/flexbooker-data-leak-millions/
GIST	<p>An online booking software provider unwittingly leaked the details of millions of customers online after misconfiguring a cloud storage solution, according to researchers.</p> <p>A team at comparison site vpnMentor found the leak on January 23 and traced it back to US firm FlexBooker, which provides software that enables businesses to accept bookings on their websites.</p> <p>The 172GB trove was left completely unsecured due to a misconfigured Amazon Web Services (AWS) S3 bucket. It was fixed three days later after the researchers reached out to both the vendor and AWS.</p> <p>"FlexBooker's misconfigured AWS account contained over 19 million HTML files which exposed what seemed to be automated emails sent via FlexBooker's platform to users. This means potentially up to 19 million people were exposed, depending on how many people made multiple bookings on a website using FlexBooker," vpnMentor explained.</p> <p>"Each email appeared to be a confirmation message for bookings made via the platform and exposed both the FlexBooker account holder and the person(s) who made a booking."</p> <p>Among the data viewed by the team included full names, email addresses, phone numbers and appointment details.</p> <p>Each exposed email contained a link with a unique code that could be used to create cancellation links, edit links and view appointment details, the report added. Data on some children was also exposed via a FlexBooker client which was a babysitting service.</p> <p>If hackers managed to access the leaked information, they could have used it to craft follow-on phishing and identity theft attacks by posing as the businesses with which end-customers made bookings.</p> <p>The discovery came just days after FlexBooker was forced to admit a December data breach that purportedly compromised nearly four million customer accounts.</p>

	<p>“On December 23, 2021, starting at 4:05 PM EST our account on Amazon’s AWS servers was compromised, resulting in our temporary inability to service customer accounts, and preventing customers from accessing their data,” it said at the time.</p> <p>“As part of the incident, our system data storage was also accessed and downloaded. In response to the outage, we worked closely with Amazon to restore a backup, and were able to restore operations within 12 hours.”</p> <p>It’s unclear whether this incident also stemmed from a misconfigured server or if the attackers compromised FlexBooker’s cloud infrastructure differently.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/18 High severity WordPress plugin bug
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/high-severity-wordpress-plugin-bug/
GIST	<p>Security experts are urging users of a popular WordPress plugin to update immediately after a bug was found that could allow attackers to steal sensitive data and potentially even hijack vulnerable sites.</p> <p>UpDraft Plus describes itself as “the world’s most trusted WordPress backup.”</p> <p>This makes it a “treasure trove” of valuable data, including configuration files that could be used to access websites’ backend databases and their contents, warned security vendor Wordfence.</p> <p>Unfortunately, the new vulnerability (CVE-2022-0633) could allow any logged-in user, including subscriber-level users, to download backups made with the plugin.</p> <p>“One of the features that the plugin implemented was the ability to send backup download links to an email of the site owner’s choice,” the firm explained. “Unfortunately, this functionality was insecurely implemented making it possible for low-level authenticated users like subscribers to craft a valid link that would allow them to download backup files.”</p> <p>Threat actors would need an active account on a victim’s system to exploit the vulnerability, meaning it would be largely confined to highly targeted attacks. However, a CVSS score of 8.5 is rated high severity.</p> <p>“The consequences of a successful targeted attack are likely to be severe, as they could include leaked passwords and PII, and in some cases site takeover if the attacker is able to obtain database credentials from a configuration file and successfully access the site database,” said Wordfence.</p> <p>All UpDraft Plus users are urged to upgrade to version 1.22.3, fixing the bug.</p> <p>“WordPress represents one of the largest backends of websites on the internet. The security problems in WordPress come from its vast ecosystem of plugins that run the gamut from capable developers to hobbyists,” explained Netenrich principal threat hunter, John Bambenek.</p> <p>“Access to the backups and database will likely first be used for credential theft but there are many possibilities for attackers to take advantage of the information. It’s a good and proactive move for Wordpress to have its own threat intel team that is working vulnerabilities in third-party plugins.”</p>
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HEADLINE	02/18 TrickBot targets 140,000 victims in 14mo.
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/trickbot-targets-140000-victims-in/
GIST	<p>The infamous Trickbot Trojan has targeted customers of scores of big-name brands over the past year, including Amazon, PayPal and Microsoft, according to new data from Check Point.</p> <p>The security vendor claimed that the malware had infected at least 140,000 victims since November 2020, with attackers being careful to target high-profile victims.</p>

Among the 60 brands that had customers targeted in this campaign were also Bank of America, American Express, and Wells Fargo.

APAC was the most affected region over the 14-month period, with an estimated 3.3% of organizations impacted. Next came Latin America (2.1%), Europe (1.9%), Africa (1.8%) and North America (1.4%).

Attacks typically begin with phishing emails, including malicious macros.

Although it began life as a banking Trojan, Trickbot steadily grew in sophistication over the years and now features 20 modules that can be executed on-demand to steal data and launch additional malware.

The malware has remained stubbornly persistent by using a decentralized architecture, choosing targets selectively and deploying anti-analysis techniques.

Check Point's research analyzed three modules: a web-inject function designed to steal banking and credential data; a tabDLL module that steals credentials to spread malware via network shares; and pwgrab, which steals credentials from a range of apps, including the world's most popular browsers.

"Trickbot attacks high-profile victims to steal credentials and provide its operators access to the portals with sensitive data where they can cause even more damage. At the same time, we know that the operators behind the infrastructure are very experienced with malware development at a high-level," explained Check Point cybersecurity research and innovation manager Alexander Chailtyko.

"The combination of these two factors is what allows Trickbot to remain a dangerous threat for more than five years already. I strongly urge people to only open documents from trusted sources and to use different passwords on different websites."

Check Point also urged users not to enable macros in unsolicited email attachments.

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HEADLINE	02/18 E-cigarette web store hacked; card skimmer
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/stop-vaping-major-e-cigarette-store-hacked-to-steal-credit-cards/
GIST	<p>BleepingComputer has confirmed Element Vape, a prominent online seller of e-cigarettes and vaping kits is serving a credit card skimmer on its live site, likely after getting hacked.</p> <p>With its presence across the U.S. and Canada, Element Vape sells e-cigarettes, vaping devices, e-liquids, and CBD products in both retail outlets and on their online store.</p> <p>Vaping site pulls in JavaScript to skim credit cards Element Vape's website is loading a malicious JavaScript file from a third-party website that appears to contain a credit card stealer, as seen by BleepingComputer.</p> <p>Threat actors employing such credit card stealers on eCommerce stores by injecting scripts are referred to as Magecart.</p> <p>It isn't exactly known for how long has the malicious script been present on ElementVape.com.</p> <p>Our analysis of ElementVape.com on Wayback Machine indicates the above code was absent as of February 5th 2022 and before. Therefore, the infection appears to be more recent, occurring sometime after the date and before getting discovered today.</p> <p>Large but obscure e-cig retailer</p>

It isn't clear how was ElementVape.com's backend code modified in the first place to sneak in the malicious script.

And, this is not the first time Element Vape has been compromised either.

In 2018, Element Vape customers reported receiving letters from the company stating that a data breach had occurred and the "window of intrusion between Dec 6, 2017 and June 27, 2018" potentially exposed customers' personal information to threat actors. Element Vape [confirmed](#) the claims via what appears to be the company's Reddit account.

Following this event, Illinois-based consumer Artur Tyksinski [sued](#) Element Vape alleging that the vaping retailer "failed to timely notify affected individuals of the data breach" and didn't have adequate procedures in place to prevent unauthorized access to customers' confidential information. This was followed by a class-action [lawsuit](#) in 2019, demanding a trial by jury.

Despite supposedly being "[one of the world's largest online Vape retailers](#)" of e-cigarettes across retail stores and online, not much is readily known about Element Vape.

Known as [TheSY LLC](#) in some states, Element Vape's Twitter account shows a following of more than 13,000 users.

But, oddly enough, their tweets are protected, making it harder to interact with the retailer.

The company, according to its website, is based in California and has been in operation since 2013.

"Our personal philosophy is to give consumers more than what they pay for. With an uncompromising drive to exceed expectations, we are committed to help [sic] customers experience the best possible shopping experience," states Element Vape's website.

Last year, the company partnered with PUDO (Picking Up or Dropping Off) Inc. to make its e-cigarettes and vaping goods available for "pick-up" across Canada's PUDOpoint Counters.

BleepingComputer has notified Element Vape of the issue via its [Zendesk support site](#), which at the time of our analysis, did not appear to contain the malicious script.

Since users may be actively shopping on the store, we believe it's in the public interest to share details about this ongoing attack and prevent customers from getting their financial info stolen.

If you have recently made any purchases on the website, make sure to check your credit card transactions for any suspicious activity.

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HEADLINE	02/17 Hackers slip into Microsoft Team chats
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/hackers-slip-into-microsoft-teams-chats-to-distribute-malware/
GIST	<p>Security researchers warn that some attackers are compromising Microsoft Teams accounts to slip into chats and spread malicious executables to participants in the conversation.</p> <p>More than 270 million users are relying on Microsoft Teams every month, many of them trusting the platform implicitly, despite the absence of protections against malicious files.</p> <p>Simple but efficient method</p> <p>Researchers at Avanan, a Check Point company that secures cloud email and collaboration platforms, found that hackers started to drop malicious executable files in conversations on Microsoft Teams communication platform.</p>

The attacks started in January, the company says in a report today, and the threat actor inserts in a chat an executable file called “User Centric” to trick the user into running it.

Once executed, the malware writes data into the system registry installs DLLs and establishes persistence on the Windows machine.

“In this Teams attack, hackers have attached a malicious Trojan document to a chat thread. When clicked on, the file will eventually take over the user’s computer” - [Avanan](#)

The method used to gain access to Teams accounts remains unclear but some possibilities include stealing credentials for email or Microsoft 365 via phishing or compromising a partner organization.

Automatic analysis of the malware distributed this way shows that the trojan can establish persistence through Windows Registry Run keys or by creating an entry in the startup folder.

It also collects detailed information about the operating system and the hardware it runs on, along with the security state of the machine based on the OS version and the patches installed.

Excessive trust

Although the attack is quite simple, it may also be very efficient because many users trust files received over Teams, Avanan researchers say.

The company analyzed data from hospitals that use Teams and found that doctors use the platform to share medical information unrestricted.

While individuals are typically suspicious of information received over email, due to email phishing awareness training, they exhibit no caution with files received over Teams.

Moreover, Teams provides guest and external access capabilities that allow collaboration with people outside the company. Avanan says that these invitations are usually met by minimal oversight.

“Because of the unfamiliarity with the Teams platform, many will just trust and approve the requests. Within an organization, a user can very easily pretend to be someone else, whether it's the CEO, CFO or IT help desk” - [Avanan](#)

The researchers say that the issue is aggravated by “the fact that default Teams protections are lacking, as scanning for malicious links and files is limited” and “many email security solutions do not offer robust protection for Teams.”

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HEADLINE	02/17 Attackers adapt, become more agile
SOURCE	https://www.darkreading.com/threat-intelligence/attackers-hone-their-playbooks-become-more-agile
GIST	<p>Cybercriminals and nation-state actors adapted to defenders' tactics and became more efficient in 2021, with attackers relying more on data leaks combined with ransomware to extort increasing sums of money from companies — and in some cases using data leaks without encrypting data to force a company to pay, according to two analyses published this week.</p> <p>Data leaks associated with ransomware jumped 84% in 2021, compared with the previous year, according to cybersecurity firm CrowdStrike's annual "Global Threat Report," published Wednesday. Almost two-thirds (62%) of attackers avoided using malware for the initial compromise, and in 45% of incidents, the attackers used interactive intrusion — with fingers on the keyboard — to infect systems.</p> <p>In the past, companies use to be able to blame "sophisticated actors" for breaches, provide customers with credit-monitoring services, and essentially avoid any major consequences of a breach, but now the</p>

adversaries are taking control of the disclosure and the negotiation, says Adam Meyers, senior vice president for intelligence at CrowdStrike.

"Organizations need to understand that the threat actors are not just going after systems," he says. "They are going after their data and they are using it against them in ways that are far more dangerous than just encrypting it."

The adoption of data extortion highlights how attacks change to adapt to defenders tactics, with data leaks hitting every industry in higher numbers in 2021 than the previous year. The industrial and engineering sector suffered the most attacks, with ransomware-linked data leaks rising above 400 incidents, compared with about 230 in 2020. The second most targeted industry, manufacturing, had almost 300 data leaks, while technology firms suffered more than 200, according to the CrowdStrike report.

In 2021, the company investigated more targeted attacks, which increased to 18% of the total incidents investigated, up from 13% in 2020. The share of hacktivism-related threats remained the same at 1%, while e-crime and unattributed threats, which make up the majority of incidents — a half and a third, respectively — fell slightly.

A key theme for 2021 is that attackers continue to move operations to new approaches or malware wherever possible, the report states.

"New tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs) used in data theft attacks in 2021 aided adversaries in extorting their victims — for example, [one group] avoided using publicly available exfiltration tools by developing their own," CrowdStrike states in the report. "Another major development was increased data theft and extortion without the use of ransomware, leading to the establishment of new marketplaces dedicated to advertising and selling victim data."

Data Weaponization

While many organizations have refused to pay ransoms to cybercriminals, the attackers have attempted to take control of negotiations back from victims by adding data leaks — and in some cases, denial-of-service attacks — to their repertoire. Organizations that do not comply with demands will find sensitive data leaked to the public, Meyer says.

"Data is increasingly being weaponized, and more and more actors are doing data weaponization because it gives the attacker a control lever with the victim," he says. "It becomes a way for the threat actor to take control of the situation in a way that they could not when they only encrypted the data."

Attackers' shift in their attacks is a theme of another report published this week by security advisory firm Kroll. Exploitation of vulnerabilities jumped to the second most-used method of initial access, up from fifth place, with 27% of attacks in the fourth quarter using exploits, according to Kroll's "[Q4 2021 Threat Landscape](#)" report. The top method of initial access continues to be phishing attacks that steal credentials, the company states.

Ransomware and e-mail compromises, including phishing, continue to be the most common types of threat incidents, together accounting for two-thirds of all incidents, according to Kroll. Companies need to become more agile in how they test and apply patches for critical systems, according to Keith Wojcieszek, managing director in Kroll's cyber risk practice.

"While law enforcement made significant headway in disrupting attackers, the fact that we saw new ransomware variations and extortion sites, combined with splinter ransomware groups, demonstrates the agile operations and malicious intent of these criminal groups," he said in a statement. "Add this to the higher number of software vulnerabilities being exploited by ransomware operators and the speed at which they are compromised, and it underlines the importance of legislative action against attackers to take them out of operation completely."

	Attackers continue to give defenders very little time to react to a breach. One way CrowdStrike measures the speed and agility of attackers is the so-called "breakout time," which is the amount of time it takes for an attacker to move from the initial compromise to infect other computers on the network. Between 2022 and 2021, the breakout time remained nearly the same, with attackers averaging 1 hour and 38 minutes in 2021 and 1 hour and 32 minutes the previous year.
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HEADLINE	02/18 Ransomware savage reign continues
SOURCE	https://www.helpnetsecurity.com/2022/02/18/rise-ransomware-attacks/?web_view=true
GIST	<p>SonicWall released a report which details a sustained meteoric rise in ransomware with 623.3 million attacks globally. Nearly all monitored threats, cyberattacks and malicious digital assaults rose in 2021 including: ransomware, encrypted threats, IoT malware and cryptojacking.</p> <p>“Cyberattacks become more attractive and potentially more disastrous as dependence on information technology increases,” said SonicWall President and CEO Bill Conner. “Securing information in a boundless world is a near impossible and thankless job, especially as the boundaries of organizations are ever-expanding to limitless endpoints and networks.”</p> <p>Dramatic rise in ransomware attacks</p> <p>Researchers diligently tracked the dramatic rise in ransomware, recording an astounding 318.6 million more ransomware attacks than 2020, a 105% increase. Ransomware volume has risen 232% since 2019. High-profile ransomware attacks impacted businesses, state and federal governments, schools, hospitals and even individuals. Attacks hit supply chains, causing widespread system downtime, economic loss and reputational damage. Following global trends, all industries faced large increases of ransomware volume, including government (+1,885%), healthcare (755%), education (152%) and retail (21%).</p> <p>As cyberattack vectors expand, malicious assaults climb</p> <p>The frequency and variety of cyberattacks continue to expand every year, with an increasing cost to organizations worldwide. SMBs and enterprises are progressively threatened by an assortment of cyberattacks, and without knowing what they are, or how cybercriminals operate, protecting business-critical data from cyberattacks becomes unmanageable.</p> <p>“Attacks on networks rose to a fever pitch in 2021,” said SonicWall VP of Platform Architecture Dmitriy Ayrapetov. “Ransomware, cryptojacking, vulnerably exploitation, phishing and other attacks continue to plague organizations around the world and overwhelm security teams. It’s important to understand the breakdown of these attacks and why they continue to be successful, as well as the drivers and trends behind them.”</p> <p>Insight on additional cyber threats</p> <p>Apache Log4j vulnerabilities were quickly exploited, with threat actors logging 142.2 million exploit attempts between Dec. 11 and Jan. 31 — an average of 2.7 million each day. Within three days of the public disclosure, exploit attempts had already passed the 1 million mark.</p> <p>Malware volume was slightly down again in 2021, marking both a third-straight year of decrease as well as a seven-year low. However, an uptick in attacks during the second half of 2021 almost completely erased the 22% drop in malware that SonicWall had recorded at the mid-year point, bringing the total decrease for 2021 to just 4% — suggesting malware numbers may rebound in 2022.</p> <p>Encrypted threats increased 167% year-over-year. In August, the number of encrypted attacks broke the 1 million mark for the first time, then continued to rise, reaching nearly 2.5 million by year’s end.</p> <p>Cryptojacking continued to surge last year, rising 19% globally to 97.1 million, which is the most attacks that SonicWall Capture Labs threat researchers have ever recorded in a single year.</p>

	IoT malware volume rose 6% in 2021, totaling 60.1 million hits by year's end. While this isn't good news, it's at least better than it has been: In 2019 and 2020, IoT malware volume rose 218% and 66%, respectively. With no corresponding slowdown in the proliferation of connected devices, this suggests that attack volumes may be leveling off.
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HEADLINE	02/17 New FBI unit tackles crypto cyber crimes
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/feb/17/administration-tackle-cryptocurrency-crimes-new-fb/
GIST	<p>The Biden administration said Thursday it is escalating the fight to crack down on cryptocurrency-fueled crimes through the formation of a new specialized FBI unit and the naming of a Justice Department prosecutor to lead a national enforcement team.</p> <p>Hacks and cyberattacks have hammered America's public and private computer networks in recent years, and criminals encrypting systems with ransomware typically require payment in digital currency to unfreeze access to computer networks. IBM has estimated that the average ransomware breach cost \$4.62 million between May 2020 and March 2021.</p> <p>To combat the cybercriminals, Deputy Attorney General Lisa Monaco said Thursday that the FBI is creating a "Virtual Asset Exploitation Unit" and she named Eun Young Choi, a computer crimes prosecutor, to lead the National Cryptocurrency Enforcement Team that started last year. The FBI unit will gather cryptocurrency experts who understand virtual asset seizure and digital ledger analysis and join the work started by the Justice Department team last year.</p> <p>"Ransomware and digital extortion, like many other crimes fueled by cryptocurrency, only work if the bad guys get paid, which means we have to bust their business model," said Ms. Monaco at the Munich Cyber Security Conference.</p> <p>Last week, Ms. Monaco announced the arrest of a New York couple accused of a conspiracy to launder cryptocurrency. The Justice Department said the federal government seized \$3.6 billion in cryptocurrency related to a 2016 hack of digital currency exchange.</p> <p>The FBI has had some success in recovering cryptocurrency paid in response to ransomware attacks. Last year, the U.S. government said it recovered about \$2.3 million paid to the ransomware attackers who struck Colonial Pipeline, a major U.S. fuel supplier. An FBI unit in San Francisco worked to recover the funds.</p> <p>Ms. Monaco said Thursday that the strategy of following the money led the government to gangster Al Capone in the 1930s, destroyed the La Cosa Nostra mafia in the 1960s, and shuttered terrorist financing networks earlier this century, and it would be useful again in tackling crypto criminals.</p> <p>"The currency might be virtual but the message to companies is concrete: If you report to us, we can follow the money and not only help you, but hopefully prevent the next victim," Ms. Monaco said.</p>
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Terror Conditions

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HEADLINE	02/17 Report: Afghan evacuees not fully vetted
SOURCE	https://www.devdiscourse.com/article/international/1926873-counter-terror-center-did-not-evaluate-afghan-evacuees-before-they-entered-us-report
GIST	Afghans evacuated to the US during the Taliban conquest of Afghanistan last summer were not fully vetted by the National Counter-Terrorism Center (NCTC) before arrival, a new report revealed on Thursday. "[W]e found that Afghan evacuees were not vetted by the NCTC using all data prior to arriving in CONUS [Continental United States]," a Defense Department Inspector General report said on Thursday.

	<p>The failure occurred because Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) enrollments were compared against Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Automated Biometric Identification System data. However, the report said the data did not initially include all biometric data in the Defense Department's Automated Biometric Identification System.</p> <p>"[I]n August 2021, NGIC personnel expanded their normal analytic review of all biometric watch list matches to also include non-watch list matches of Afghan evacuees using all [Defense Department] data to close these gaps. ... The NGIC entered into an agreement with the DHS to access the necessary CBP records," the report added. Later, the US official then identified Afghans with derogatory information in the Automated Biometric Identification System database that was believed to be in the US and subsequently developed informal procedures to notify both the Defense Department and other agencies about these individuals.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/17 US withdrawal Somalia: al-Shabab expands
SOURCE	https://www.stripes.com/theaters/africa/2022-02-17/somalia-al-qaida-africa-united-states-5056544.html
GIST	<p>U.S.-backed forces in Somalia are now outgunned by Africa's largest terrorist group, raising concerns that a 2021 decision to pull out American troops and curtail airstrikes has helped the militants' insurgency expand, two senior officials said Thursday.</p> <p>"It probably is not an effective long-term strategy," said one of the defense officials, who was authorized to speak on background about security conditions in Africa.</p> <p>Special operations forces had been assisting local units for several years in battling al-Shabab, which is linked to al-Qaida. But shortly before leaving office, President Donald Trump ordered some 700 U.S. troops out of Somalia.</p> <p>Since then, U.S. Africa Command also has halted most airstrikes in the country. The new administration of President Joe Biden has sought to limit drone strikes in Somalia and elsewhere.</p> <p>By comparison, the U.S. conducted 63 strikes against Islamic militants in Somalia in 2020. AFRICOM, however, has come under criticism in the past by advocacy groups that say the attacks on al-Shabab threaten civilians.</p> <p>But with fewer airstrikes and less U.S. military involvement on the ground, al-Shabab is showing signs of resurgence in Somalia, the defense officials said.</p> <p>"We are placing less pressure on them," one of the defense officials said.</p> <p>With a force estimated at between 5,000 and 7,000 fighters, the terrorist group now has more freedom of movement and therefore the ability attack more often, the officials said.</p> <p>Still, although al-Shabab advertises ambitions to go after Western targets outside Somalia, it lacks the capacity to attack the U.S. homeland, the officials said.</p> <p>For years, the U.S. has worked to strengthen Somalia's fledgling army, especially the country's Danab, or Lightning, advanced infantry brigade.</p> <p>Before the 2021 withdrawal, U.S. special operations troops maintained a small but steady presence in the country and served as battlefield advisers to local forces. At times, that put American troops in the crossfire.</p> <p>The militants, who have been a force in Somalia for nearly two decades, are well-funded. The group's annual revenue, much of it coming from taxation in areas it controls, stands at about \$120 million, the defense officials said.</p>

HEADLINE	02/18 Germany: woman charged; ISIS member
SOURCE	https://www.cbs17.com/news/german-woman-charged-with-membership-in-islamic-state-group/
GIST	<p>BERLIN (AP) — Federal prosecutors in Germany said Friday they have formally charged a German woman with membership in a foreign terrorist organization for traveling to Syria with her young son to join the Islamic State group.</p> <p>Prosecutors said Verena M., whose surname wasn't released for privacy reasons, has also been indicted on charges of child endangerment, breaching her duty of care as a parent and breaking arms control laws.</p> <p>In a statement, federal prosecutors accused her of leaving Germany for Turkey with her son in 2015, against the father's wishes. She then traveled to the Iraqi city of Mosul, where she joined the Islamic State, later moving to Raqqa in Syria.</p> <p>During her time with the Islamic State, M. is alleged to have benefited from financial and housing support the group provided. In return she allegedly ran the household for her new husband, a fighter with the group, and educated her son according to the group's radical ideas.</p> <p>Prosecutors also accuse her of possessing two assault rifles.</p> <p>M. was captured by Kurdish forces in 2019 and brought back to Germany two years later.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/17 UK court: 16yr-old pleads guilty terrorism
SOURCE	https://www.counterterrorism.police.uk/16-year-old-from-leeds-pleads-guilty-to-terrorism-offences-following-summons/
GIST	<p>A 16 year old boy from Leeds has today (Thursday, February 17) pleaded guilty to two offences under the Terrorism Act after been summoned to appear before Westminster Youth Court.</p> <p>He was formally charged today with one offence under Section 2 of the Terrorism Act (dissemination of a terrorist publication) and one offence under Section 58 of the Terrorism Act (possession of a document or record containing information of a kind likely to be useful to a person committing or preparing an act of terrorism).</p> <p>He has today pleaded guilty to those charges and has been bailed to appear before Leeds Youth Court on March 14, 2022 for sentencing.</p> <p>The 16 year old was arrested by officers from Counter Terrorism Policing North East in May 2021 and July 2021.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/17 Inside Taliban's return to power
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/news/2022/feb/17/inside-taliban-return-to-power-afghanistan-mazar-i-sherif
GIST	<p>At the police headquarters compound in the northern Afghan city of Mazar-i-Sherif, a large crowd waited in front of a wire mesh door. The entrance was guarded by a young Taliban fighter with long shaggy hair and a beard, who sat on a broken plastic chair. Beside him was a large pile of shoes and flip-flops belonging to those who had already been admitted to meet the newly appointed Taliban police chief.</p> <p>It was mid-October 2021, seven weeks since the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, and the Taliban were now in charge of the country. In a large office, Abu Idrees, the police chief – who has since been promoted to deputy governor of Balkh province, of which Mazar is the capital – sat on a sofa, shunning the large desk that stretched nearly the width of the room, which was a symbol of authority of the</p>

previous regime. Short and stocky, with broad shoulders and a big head wrapped in a black turban, he was flanked by his deputies and sub-commanders.

Throughout the day, men – and there were only men – entered the room, squatting on the floor in front of Abu Idrees. In hushed voices, they pleaded their cases, answered summons or pledged their undying support to the Taliban regime. In theory, anyone could come and demand an audience, something unheard of under the previous government, when people had to pay bribes and pull strings to see even a low-ranking police officer, let alone the police chief himself.

On the surface, it seemed little had changed in Mazar since the Taliban captured the city in mid-August. Taliban fighters, piled on the back of army and police pickup trucks, patrolled the city, while the new white flags of the Taliban emblazoned car windshields and flew from the roofs of motorised rickshaws, but in general, life went on uninterrupted. Local people still flocked to the historic blue-tiled shrine at the heart of the city; they still thronged at night around cars selling Mazar's famous grapes, tomatoes and white aubergines; trucks laden with coal and onions still headed to the Uzbekistan border, about 50 miles north of the city, while those bringing UN food aid drove in the other direction. Even the large mural at the entrance to the city depicting the late [Ahmad Shah Massoud](#), a commander revered for his role in resisting the Taliban in the 90s, was still standing. Around the city, girls' schools were quietly reopening, defying the leadership in Kabul, which had ordered them shut. But under the surface, changes were unfolding in Mazar.

Mazar-i-Sherif sits on some of the most important trade routes in the region. The northern part of the province borders with Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Whoever rules Mazar controls the trade that passes through it, and its network of roads and custom revenues, official and unofficial. Mazar is also surrounded by fertile agricultural lands, watered by rivers that rise in the highlands of central and western Afghanistan, and which feed an ancient network of irrigation canals. These lands were spared the ravages of the Afghan civil wars of the 80s and 90s. The region produces cotton, flax seed oil, melons, Karakul wool and what locals claim to be the best hashish in Afghanistan.

Now the severe economic crisis that followed the Taliban takeover has put half of the population of Afghanistan at risk of famine, according to the UN. When the warlords who controlled the region and their business associates fled to Uzbekistan, the UAE and Turkey, they left behind government employees who had not received their meagre salaries for months, and were forced to sell their possessions to feed their hungry families.

Most of the cases brought to the police chief that October morning concerned former government employees, who complained that the Taliban had confiscated their property when they entered the city. One group of men wanted to settle a case that had been languishing in government courts for months, mired in bureaucracy and demands for bribes. A man representing the Union of the Owners of Wedding Halls complained that the Taliban were intimidating guests with their habit of inspecting halls during wedding receptions to make sure that there was no music.

Every so often, Taliban fighters and well-wishers came in to greet their old comrades, who were splayed on sofas around the room. The loudest greetings were reserved for one of Abu Idrees's commanders, a young man named Jawhar, who had big smiling eyes and brown curly hair. Seated to the right of his boss, with one foot on the sofa, Jawhar was the head of the Mazar branch of the Amr-bil-Maruf, the Taliban's feared religious and moral police.

Abu Idrees listened intently, examining the plaintiffs as he curled a lock of his beard around his index finger again and again. Occasionally, a distant look of boredom flickered across his face, which had been hardened by a decade of fighting in the mountains and hills surrounding Mazar. When he issued his verdicts – which were not open to appeal – he spoke in short, rapid sentences. His verdicts were based on the Taliban's crude justice system, a mixture of tribal custom and ultra-conservative interpretations of Islamic law.

Towards the end of the day, an old man with a close-trimmed white beard and a colourful traditional Uzbek cap squatted on the floor before the police chief. He said his son had disappeared on his way home from Kabul, after he was stopped at a Taliban checkpoint.

Abu Idrees picked up a radio set and called one of his commanders, asking about the missing young man. After a few more calls, the reply of one commander came crackling through the radio set: the young man had been detained after Taliban fighters searched his car and found he was carrying bottles of alcohol.

“Just judge him according to the Sharia, please,” the father pleaded.

“Don’t worry, we won’t kill him,” answered Abu Idrees with a mischievous smile. “He will stay in detention while we conduct a criminal investigation, and you will be informed of our decision.”

Mazar, in the 1990s, was the most secular, socially liberal of Afghan cities. In the first two decades of the 21st century, it was dominated by warlords whose militias had defeated the Taliban. During this time, money surged into the city. And yet, last August, Mazar fell to the Taliban even before cities in the Taliban’s southern heartland, such as Kandahar. The reason, in large part, was local anger at the way their city had been run in the previous 20 years.

After their victory against the Taliban in 2001, with the support of the Americans, local warlords such as Abdul Rashid Dostum and Atta Muhammad Noor, and other militia commanders responsible for the murderous anarchy of the civil war, were to play a significant role in the new democratic Afghanistan. They were given immunity from prosecution for their alleged human rights abuses and war crimes, and the opportunity to enrich themselves from the immense influx of foreign aid. After he became governor in 2004, Atta proceeded to run Mazar as his fief for the next 16 years. In time, the warlords’ greed and corruption would prove to be the undoing of the city and the country. Nothing would prove a more effective recruitment tool for the Taliban.

In these years after the fall of the Taliban, Mazar’s economy boomed thanks to the flow of foreign aid, which in turn fuelled a huge imports business, aided by the secure local environment. After late 2011, when Nato began using the northern route to resupply its troops in Afghanistan, almost half of Afghanistan’s imports entered through the border crossings north of Mazar. The city became a major commercial and transportation hub, with a constant stream of trucks hung with swinging bells and elaborate coloured decorations transporting goods between central Asia and Afghanistan.

Atta was celebrated by the international community as a model governor, a strongman running a stable and prosperous region. The truth, according to numerous sources in Mazar, was far less flattering. Atta’s allies and family dominated government jobs, as well as police and army posts in the city and the larger provinces. A man who I will call Babak, who had been one of Atta’s commanders, told me of the corruption he witnessed in these years. “The political parties were a mess,” he told me. “Every leader or minister had their team working for their financial benefit. The generals did not care about the public, the common people were insignificant for them. The peace and prosperity of this nation was not even important for them. However, former commanders like myself, or those favoured by the warlords, would be guaranteed good jobs and material reward.”

Atta and his cronies would siphon money from government contracts for building and infrastructure projects, extort a percentage of profits from thriving businesses, and levy unofficial taxes on cross-border trade. “There was not a single business that didn’t pay him a cut,” one businessman in Mazar told me.

One former police officer drove me to the main checkpoint in the entrance of Mazar, where two Taliban fighters stood directing the flow of traffic. He said that during the former government’s time, the officer in charge of that checkpoint had to pay a daily “rent” of \$1,000 a day to his commanders. The officer would then charge every passing truck a certain fee and make a profit. Corruption touched almost every aspect of day-to-day life of the city.

As a young man in the 90s, Abu Idrees had been drawn to the teachings of the Taliban. He admired what he saw as their attempts to impose order on a country ravaged by civil war, and to put an end to the rule of the warlords who had corrupted the ideals of jihad against the Soviets and turned into venal thugs. For three years prior to the American invasion, he served in the Taliban's army in Mazar, but he never rose in the ranks, for he was an ethnic Turkmen, and the Taliban were – and still are – based in the Pashtun heartland, with commanders drawn mainly from the clans of Kandahar and the mountainous regions bordering Pakistan. (A few members of the other ethnic groups – Tajiks, Turkmens and Uzbeks – joined the movement when it first came to power in the 90s, especially in the north, where the fighting was fuelled by racial hatred and ethnic massacres took place between the different communities under the Taliban flag.)

After the fall of the Taliban in November 2001, Abu Idrees fled the country, eventually settling in the Pakistani city of Quetta, where the Taliban leadership would later relocate. Defeated and demoralised, he joined one of the Taliban madrassas there, and spent the next decade living as a refugee, studying the Qur'an and the life and sayings of the prophet, under the instruction of his Taliban teachers, while scraping a living from day to day.

In the years after Abu Idrees fled to Pakistan, the Taliban who remained in Afghanistan were banned from involvement in the new Afghan government. This transitional period was dominated by former warlords who had supported the US military effort, and now had little difficulty in manipulating their new US allies to achieve their own ends. In the south and the east of the country, CIA and special forces teams hunting for Bin Laden and al-Qaida operatives expanded their target lists to include former Taliban, at the instigation of warlords and local strongmen who were settling their own feuds. In these first few years, the remaining Taliban were fighting a rearguard action for self-preservation, but over time, as they gathered strength, they coalesced into more aggressive fighting cells, which in turn evolved into an organised insurgency.

Early in 2013, Abu Idrees – who had by then obtained the title of a mawlawi, or highly qualified Islamic scholar – was summoned by senior Taliban commanders in Quetta. They asked him to head back to Afghanistan to organise Taliban resistance in the north around Mazar, and to expand the movement, especially among the Turkmen, Uzbek and Tajik populations. As an ethnic Turkmen, a former Talib, and a mawlawi, Abu Idrees was the perfect candidate for the job.

By this point, more than a decade since their defeat, the Taliban had changed the way they presented themselves to the wider world. In 2013, they opened a quasi-embassy in Doha and made efforts to portray the Taliban as an all-Afghan national liberation movement. In truth, the leadership remained overwhelmingly Pashtun, but the organisation needed to expand the insurgency, drawing into their fold the other ethnic communities that had once formed the backbone of the resistance to the Taliban.

Thirteen years after he had fled Afghanistan, Abu Idrees slipped back across the border and made a base for himself in the mountainous region outside Mazar. He found that there were already a few Taliban groups active in the area, but they were scattered, and the area under their control was limited. They were no match for the Afghan army, police and local militias. So, rather than beginning his mission with military operations, he started by spreading the word in the area, moving from one town to another – Char Bulak, Balkh, Sholgara – establishing contact with former Taliban sympathisers and recruiting new ones. "We went from house to house, and we spoke to the mullahs of the mosques and madrassas," Abu Idrees told me. What helped him win favour with the locals was the cruelty, corruption and bigotry of the local warlords and their militias. "That is why the mujahideen succeeded here," he said.

Over the next six years, Abu Idrees and other Taliban commanders led their men on military operations, harassing government posts and attacking government officials. They set up a shadow government that was the de facto ruling power in the countryside, levying taxes from farmers and businesses and administering Taliban law. The Taliban presence in northern Afghanistan expanded, gradually encroaching on Mazar itself until, by late 2018, they were no more than a couple of miles from the city's outskirts, where they waited while their leaders negotiated a peace deal with the US.

Jawhar, the head of Mazar's religious police, who sat next to Abu Idrees in the police station when I visited, had been among the men who had fought under Abu Idrees's command to retake Mazar for the Taliban. He came from the same area as his commander, but unlike Abu Idrees, Jawhar, now in his 30s, had spent most of his life living under the rule of the new "democratic" Afghanistan.

Jawhar's journey began when he was a teenage student in a small madrassa in Mazar, tucked down a dusty lane between walled pomegranate and mulberry orchards, and known for its extremist rhetoric. "Some of our teachers in the madrassas had connections with the Taliban, and I wanted to join," Jawhar told me. But after 2001, he said "there weren't many active Talibs in Mazar – only a few who showed resistance to the corruption". These people helped inspire Jawhar to join the movement later.

In 2011, Jawhar travelled to Waziristan in Pakistan, where he spent two years fighting against the Pakistani state. After the Taliban had become established in the north of Afghanistan, under Abu Idrees, Jawhar's commander in Waziristan told him to take up the fight back home. "My target was America and Americans, but before those Americans, the Afghan army was standing in the frontline," Jawhar told me. "If they did not have the Afghans with them, the Americans were like the blind," he said. "So I wanted to hit, cripple, or blind this eye."

He fought in the hills and mountains in his district, not far from his home town. "We could only go to the mountains that were under the control of the Taliban. We kept moving – one night here, the next elsewhere. We were often hungry and thirsty. Sometimes villages gave us bread that we dried and ate for a month or two, or we made biscuits by frying wheat or maize, and we were eating them for months, but sometimes we had nothing but animal fodder and grass."

When Jawhar spoke about the faith that kept him alive, his large eyes filled with messianic fervour. In 2015, he and nine other Taliban were arrested, after a firefight with a militia that was supported by armoured vehicles and helicopters. He was taken to the local office of the Afghan intelligence service, where he says he was interrogated and whipped with thick cables, then tied to a chair and electrocuted. He was eventually sent to the Pul-e-Charkhi prison north of Kabul. He told me that in Pul-e-Charkhi, he recruited fellow prisoners to the Taliban and organised riots from his prison cell. After nearly three years, he was transferred to the prison at the American airbase of Bagram.

Torture and mistreatment of prisoners in American jails helped turn these sites into fertile recruiting centres for future jihadis. "The memories of Bagram are hard on everyone, especially me," Jawhar said. "We were three to five in each cell, we had no mattresses and we slept on the concrete floor. I became the imam of my cell, and the soldiers were always harder on the imams. Many times they called me to the door and then sprayed my face with pepper spray. Some [guards] tortured us for no reason, while others would find an excuse. In the end, the only reason was cruelty."

While the Taliban police were issuing judgments in Mazar in October 2021, in a small hotel room near the blue shrine sat Babak, the former commander who had described to me the level of corruption in Mazar under Atta's rule. He was wondering if the Taliban would respect their pledge of amnesty, or if the normal cycle of revenge and retribution, which had followed every time Mazar changed hands since the mid 90s, would play out as before.

Babak, a Tajik, had first fought against the Taliban in 1998 when they launched a big offensive to capture the city. He commanded a small unit comprised of his relatives and fellow villagers, many of whom had previously fought against the Soviets. Babak and his men had opposed the Taliban's hardline religious policies, but they had also viewed them as another hostile Pashtun force, after a century or more of incursions into the north. In 2001, Babak had been part of the US-backed force that defeated the Taliban in Mazar. From the late 2010s onwards, as a local government official and a commander, he had seen the Taliban make inroads into rural communities.

He spoke honestly and candidly, his voice soft and subdued, as he stared at a plate of raisins on the floor in front of him, like someone trying to come to terms with a death in the family. He said the people of

the region had been allowing the Taliban to come into their villages, and providing them with shelter, accommodation and ammunition, as a kind of revenge against the weak and distant central government, and as protection against the corrupt local political powers. “If you were a poor villager and didn’t have connections in the government, you would get a huge punishment for a minimal crime. Your land could be easily seized by someone with connections. But in the Taliban law, villagers were assured the safety of their lives and property. The Taliban were solving problems very quickly; that’s how they collected many people around them in the past two years, and they were even influencing my own relatives.”

In 2020, after the Trump administration announced its intentions to withdraw, the Taliban campaign intensified, and the security structures of the Afghan government began to crumble. Soldiers went months without being paid their salaries, and those stationed at isolated bases were sometimes left with little military support. “When soldiers were asking for help during battles, or when they were besieged for days without food and ammunition, we would lie, and tell them that aid was on its way and that they must wait,” Babak said.

“I had 100 soldiers in my group, but they were not getting their wages. Even I sometimes had to borrow money. Soldiers were forced to sell their ammunition. The Taliban were buying it. Sometimes they were even buying checkpoints or military posts from the army and police officers. They would hire someone inside bases to gather information and convince the soldiers not to fight,” he said. “In the last days, the soldiers just stopped fighting.”

He paused for some time, before adding: “We were the ones who crashed the government because of the corruption. The Taliban didn’t capture it, we brought it to collapse. We couldn’t fight, we sold it.”

For the first time in Mazar’s long history of war, defeat was not followed by massacres. Babak and other commanders credited the Taliban’s new pragmatism for their quick victory. “In the last few days, a new politics of diplomacy was conducted by the Taliban that affected us a lot – they declared amnesty for everyone, releasing captives and prisoners and giving them money, around 5,000 afghani [£40].”

Abu Idrees said that once the warlords fled to the border, all resistance had collapsed. “When we decided to take the city, they showed some resistance, but after just two or three days, when the soldiers saw their leaders escape over the border, they left without fighting. Some surrendered, and others just went home.”

When I was in Mazar, there were few signs of the war that ended the US’s 20-year adventure in Afghanistan. The real scenes of the disaster engulfing Afghanistan could be found 120 miles further to the west, in small tent settlements near the border with Turkmenistan, in Faryab province. The inhabitants had fled their villages, which had been devastated by war and drought, to live here.

Early one morning, blue smoke from open fires hung over a dozen or so scattered tents in one of these settlements pitched in the middle of a wasteland. Some of the tents were made of UNHCR tarpaulin, others were made of black canvas and plastic sheets sewn together. A goat or two milled about inside an animal pen, which had been constructed from a few thorny shrubs, sticks and pieces of fabric. Open latrines were scattered across the land, and a group of men gathered in front of one tent, mixing mud to build a shelter for the coming winter.

The local Taliban official had informed them that they wouldn’t receive any aid until they went back to their village, but the men had no means to return, they said, and there was nothing there for them. They had spent all the money they had a long time ago. They had to rent the tents from the owner of the land, and none of their sons and daughters went to school, because they needed the children to work. The men had been working as day labourers or porters in the local market, emptying trucks loaded with wheat sacks, but the war and the subsequent freezing of Afghanistan’s assets caused the economy to collapse, affecting everyone from university professors to day labourers. Without any jobs for the men, it was now only the barefoot children who earned tiny sums each day from collecting plastic bottles for recycling.

One emaciated man with deep wrinkles and sallow skin said last year he fell sick and had to go to Pakistan for medical treatment, so he took a loan from the landowner with a high interest rate. When the harvest failed again, he couldn't pay back the loan. Pointing at his two young girls, he said he betrothed them to the landowner in return for the debt. "They belong to him now," said the father. "He can take them now, or if he is kind, he will leave them with us until they are 12."

The two girls, eight and nine years old, stood next to each other, dressed in long blue shirts and pants. The elder sister had black eyes and a shawl wrapped loosely around her small head and shoulders. With her mop of brown hair, large eyes and crooked smile, the younger was shy and hid her face in her sister's neck. With faces smeared in dust and feet caked in mud, they watched silently the men who ruled over their lives.

Another man pointed at his daughter, who sat alone, squatting on the ground, her back resting on one of the tents. She, too, was married to pay for her father's loan. She was nearly 12 and the family she was effectively sold to might claim her any day now. Such is the desperation of starving families, that children become the last asset.

In war, as in the drought, children were the first to pay the price. Almost all the Taliban fighters I met had been recruited between the ages of 12 and 15, and they were often thrown into battle with little or no training. "I was 13 when I joined the movement," said a young lean fighter who I met outside Abu Idrees's compound. "I was given training for two days, and then I went with my brothers to war. We ambushed two police trucks. I closed my eyes and fired. I was very scared. When I opened them I saw nine policemen dead. It was my first time seeing dead people, but thanks to Allah, we came out victorious. After that, my elders gave me two months of military training. That was seven years ago, now I am 20 and we liberated our lands. I want to go back to my village and get married."

Back in Mazar, the lights of the shrine glittered in the early evening, as vendors lined up their new merchandise on wooden stalls: white Taliban flags, grainy posters and mugs bearing the picture of the late Mullah Omar and the Taliban's current leader, Haibatullah, laminated cards and badges carrying the movement's slogans. But just a few blocks away, a desperate scene was unfolding. Locals were selling their household furniture to feed their families. Sofas, fridges, kettles, stoves, gas cans, plates and pots, along with coloured mattresses and bed sheets, were all piled up in the middle of the street.

One 35-year-old man, who had loaded his household belongings into the back of a motor rickshaw, told me he had run a successful car wash before the fall of the city, but now his family were hungry. All his relatives had lost their jobs, he said. He pointed at his possessions: a carpet, an electrical fan, some pots, an aluminium crutch. "These are worth 10,000 afghanis, but no one is willing to pay even 2,000."

On the other side of town from Abu Idrees's police compound, a woman named Suhaila was hiding in the house of a relative. She had recently received threatening phone calls from the Taliban, who had accused her of blasphemy, and motivating women to contravene Sharia teachings, because she had run a government department in charge of empowering women. It was the third time, in the last 30 years of Afghan civil wars, that she had to flee her home in search of safety.

Suhaila's husband, with whom she had two children, had been executed by the Taliban when they conquered Mazar in 1998. After their victory, Taliban fighters on the back of pickup trucks drove through the streets, opening fire at anything that moved. Then they began to comb the city, going from house to house, searching for men from Afghanistan's Hazara minority, castrating and then executing them in retaliation for the slaughter of Taliban fighters the previous year. The war in the north became increasingly sectarian, as the Taliban massacred civilian Tajik and Uzbek villagers.

The Taliban, who called Mazar a centre of jahiliya – a reference to the Islamic term for the age of ignorance that preceded the revelation of the Qur'an – set about exacting terrible revenge on its people. Schools and universities were shut, a severe purdah was imposed on women, and men were herded at gunpoint to local mosques at prayer time.

Suhaila and her two infant daughters, along with other family members, headed into the mountains in the Charkent district, and built a shelter from tree branches, scraps of fabric and plastic sheets. She survived on meagre amounts of food aid distributed by NGO workers, scavenged wood to burn and begged the shepherds for milk. But she could see that her children were starving, so she put on her burqa and, carrying her two girls, walked back to the city. A relative told her that her home had been confiscated by the Taliban because it had belonged to an enemy commander.

She moved from one relative's house to another every few days, until a cousin found her a small room to rent. Suhaila remembers these days of Taliban rule as one long horror. After working as a cleaner, she eventually found a job with a foreign NGO distributing aid and providing widows with vocational training. Sometimes the NGO paid her in flour, as money was becoming worthless. As she walked back and forth to her room, she was often admonished by the Taliban fighters, who spat on her and hit her with sticks, because she was a woman walking alone without a male guardian.

Three years later, in 2001, when the US military backed the warlords in their bid to recapture the city, Suhaila had cowered in her apartment, hugging her daughters, as bombs and shells exploded outside. When the Taliban were defeated, she emerged, feeling as if she had been released from prison. She went on to join the country's nascent civil service. Building on her experience as an aid worker, she ran programmes with the help of the international community to distribute aid and help women build their shattered lives, now that they were free to work, and study. Her two daughters were finally able to begin attending school.

Now, with the Taliban back in power, Suhaila had again gone into hiding. "Even breathing is becoming difficult for me," she told me. While female teachers were allowed to go back to work, she said most of the government employees like herself were told to stay home. Some social workers and activists were being arrested and disappearing. Twenty-three years after the Taliban killed her husband, she finds herself in the same situation of being unable even to go to the market and do her shopping because she has no male guardian. "Whatever we had achieved as women in the past 20 years is gone."

I contacted her in her hiding place and asked her if she thought the Taliban had changed. "I am very sensitive even to the word Taliban," she said in a voice message. "They are the same Taliban, but they are aware that if they try to implement any of their real policies, people will protest and post on social media. In their first government they didn't care about what the international organisations or the media said, but now they are very sensitive about their public image. Activists and human rights workers are being disappeared in the middle of the night. The Taliban are desperate for recognition from the international community, so whatever horrors they do, they do in secret."

One night I received a call from Jawhar, who asked me to meet him in a government compound that had become a base for his men. It was cold, and the streets were nearly deserted. A haze muffled the orange street lights, and a few Taliban fighters stood shivering at their checkpoints. When I arrived, Jawhar was sitting among dozens of other fighters, talking with another commander, a fellow former prisoner from Bagram. They were friendly and offered me hot green tea.

Shortly after, Jawhar led me into a small office where he sat on a metal chair, under a white neon light. His long hair curled over his ears, and the long tail of his turban flowed between his legs. His smile showed a row of straight white teeth. I asked him about his job as the head of the religious police in Mazar. Were they going to resume their hardline policies, such as banning women from walking in the streets alone and forcing men into mosques?

"No, now we are different," he replied. "Now, we are focusing on spreading our message through the imams. We tell the people there are too many women without Islamic hijab. I told them, dear sisters, don't come out like this. I didn't hit or beat anyone, although I have permission to beat or handcuff or do anything I want, but I haven't arrested a single person or used force on them. I use good language, soft behaviour, friendship and love. I told them, I came out to defend you, and my brothers and sisters, defending your dignity is my duty."

I told him I had been in Mazar for a few days, and I hadn't seen a single woman who wasn't wearing a hijab.

"Yes, but this hijab is not good; they still show their faces," he answered.

But even according to the most conservative interpretations of the Sharia, women are allowed to show their faces and hands, I said.

"Yes, but then bad things happen to men when they look at the women."

And why don't the men not look at women?

"Oh, but that is hard. Women must cover."

As an example of his soft new policies, he told me that a few days earlier, he had raided a basement where a group of people were gambling. Rather than arresting or assaulting the gamblers, he said that he had told them: "'Before it was the Americans who were promoting such bad things, but now, my brothers, we are living in the Islamic Emirate. Come to madrassas to learn about your religion.' I told them that it's their first time, so I won't say anything. The second and third time, I would be forced to behave in a way that they won't like."

I thanked Jawhar for his time and was about to leave, when he looked at me with his small, slightly frenzied eyes, and asked me in his halting Arabic, which he had picked up from "Arab brothers" in Bagram, if I had met "brothers from al-Qaida" before. I said yes – in Iraq, Syria and Yemen.

"Have you asked the leaders of the Emirate [Afghanistan] and the Taliban what they think of al-Qaida? Do you think the Islamic Emirate are supporting al-Qaida?"

I said according to their public statements, they had emphasised that they were not dealing with them. Under the conditions for a peace deal with the US, the Taliban were supposed to be operating only within Afghanistan.

"How can they say this? Jihad is not limited to a specific time or specific geography," he answered. "How can you limit jihad to Afghanistan only, does the sharia approve of that?"

I don't know, I said, you are the mawlawi. We laughed.

"Yes, thanks to God, I am a scholar, and while I was in prison in Peshawar, Pole Charkhi and Bagram, I read many books. I abide by the ruling of our leaders and emirs, but, from my point of view, we need to reach out to our dear brothers in Iraq, Syria and Palestine. They are our brothers, and like us, they are also mujahideen for the sake of Allah, just as I was a mujahid. I want to reach out to them, and I want to go and continue my jihad in Iraq, Syria and Palestine, but now the time is difficult, and I can't ask our leaders for permission to travel. But all the Taliban, and myself especially, are yearning to fight the jihad against the infidel and the hypocrites like the government of Iraq, and to support our brothers against the infidels. In my heart I love them."

Then how about the Pakistani Taliban, I asked – which the leadership in Afghanistan had declared that they don't support. "Oh, they are our brothers," he answered instantly. "But according to the current political situation, it's not in the interest of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan to declare its support for them openly. But they are our brothers, and we stand shoulder to shoulder, we share the same politics and intents, but we can't declare that."

As he talked, he grew increasingly fervent. "In my heart and soul, I love mujahideen of al-Qaida, and I tell my Muslim brother to carry your sword and fight the infidels, and to follow the saying of the prophet, that jihad will continue until judgment day."

Suspicious, Unusual

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HEADLINE	02/16 Trouble brewing under Antarctic glaciers
SOURCE	https://www.wired.com/story/serious-salty-trouble-may-be-brewing-under-antarctic-glaciers/#intcid= wired-verso-hp-trending_80c4e9f8-6bf3-45e4-aa40-831cead59413_popular4-1
GIST	<p>ANTARCTICA'S GLACIERS ARE under threat, but not in the way you're thinking: The problem isn't so much that the sun's beating down on them, but that the warming sea is uppercutting them. The bit of a glacier that's resting on land is known as an ice sheet, and the bit floating on the ocean is the ice shelf. The exact divider between them, where the ice lifts off, is called the grounding line. As the world rapidly warms, that line is falling back. And as a result, Antarctica's glaciers may be degrading far faster than scientists anticipated.</p> <p>Think of an ice shelf as a cork that's keeping the rest of the glacier, that ice sheet, from sliding into the ocean. The Florida-sized Thwaites Glacier, for instance, is known as the "Doomsday Glacier" for good reason: It's attached to a seamount off the coast and is holding back ice that would raise global sea levels by two feet if it all melted. Last month, scientists reported that Thwaites' ice shelf could crumble in three to five years.</p> <p>But current glacier melt models don't account for a phenomenon called tidal pumping. Whenever the tide rises, it heaves Thwaites' ice sheet upward, allowing relatively warm seawater to rush farther upstream underneath the glacier. That drives melting along its belly, making the ice sheet more prone to fracture. "It means that warm water that is at the bottom of the glacier can infiltrate up to several kilometers upstream," says University of Houston physicist Pietro Milillo, who is studying Antarctic glaciers. "And all of a sudden you start realizing, 'Wait a minute! The models that actually predict the future state of the glaciers do not have these kinds of phenomena. They basically have a grounding line that is fixed.'"</p> <p>Last month, Milillo and other scientists reported that tidal pumping is forcing the rapid retreat of the grounding lines of other West Antarctica glaciers—Pope, Smith, and Kohler. Using a satellite that fired radar waves at the ice, the scientists could detect minute changes in elevation along each grounding line. "When the tide gets higher, the entire ice shelf lifts up," says Milillo, lead author of a paper describing the work in the journal <i>Nature Geoscience</i>. "So by measuring how much it moves at the top because of the tides, we're able to actually see where the grounding line is at the bottom of the glacier."</p> <p>The measurements are dire. In 2017, Pope's grounding line fell back over two miles in just three and a half months. Between 2016 and 2018, Smith logged a mile and a quarter retreat a year, while Kohler pulled back three quarters of a mile. And when that grounding line starts retreating, it initiates a cascade of catastrophes: The more of the glacier's underside that's exposed to seawater, the more melting. "Once you trigger a subtle retreat, they're going to just keep retreating and retreating, which means that they're going to keep speeding up," says Milillo. "Speeding up the glacier acts like a chewing gum: The glacier thins, and by thinning also you have a speed-up, because while not in contact with the bed, there is less resistance to the flow. Which means the glacier [movement] will accelerate and in turn will inject more ice into the ocean."</p> <p>The grounding lines of these neighboring glaciers might even withdraw to the point where they actually merge. "That will take a long time, probably. But if that <i>were</i> to happen—I'm not saying it's going to—that's when you get this mega problem," says Peter Washam, an oceanographer and climate scientist at Cornell University, who studies Thwaites but wasn't involved in this new research. "The fear with Thwaites is that as you move upstream, it pulls such a large area of ice that, once you begin to pull that quickly, you can sort of envelop the glaciers around it."</p> <p>Think of it like a watershed, in which several creeks drain into a larger river, but instead of liquid water it's (slowly) flowing ice. "If you unplug Thwaites, you're pulling the cork out of the drain," says Lizzy Clyne, a geophysicist and glaciologist at Lewis and Clark College, who researches the glacier but wasn't involved</p>

in this new work. “Then you allow the ice that was previously flowing in different directions to be like, ‘Well, the wall behind me went away, so now I’m going to fall back into Thwaites.’ And you can therefore in theory tap on a lot more ice.” If Thwaites and its surrounding glaciers are destroyed, collectively they could add 10 feet to sea levels.

Last week, another [paper](#) from researchers at the Georgia Institute of Technology, CalTech, and Dartmouth College modeled how warm seawater is likely even squeezing *past* the grounding line, accelerating melting even further. Scientists previously thought that the grounding line acts as a kind of barrier to keep seawater from slipping underneath the ice sheet resting on the ground. But this new mathematical modeling suggests that if the ground is flat or “retrograde,” meaning it slopes deeper into the interior of the ice sheet—and both apply to these glaciers in West Antarctica—saltwater can indeed intrude past the grounding line. Like, *way* past.

In these conditions, and if the freshwater flow from melting ice is not too fast, seawater should be able to invade at least hundreds of feet past the grounding line, and probably miles, says Alexander Robel, head of the [Ice and Climate Group](#) at Georgia Tech and lead author of the new paper, published in the journal *The Cryosphere*. Yet, like tidal pumping, this phenomenon also isn’t represented in current models of glacial melt in Antarctica. “This is based on the prior assumption that basically there’s a hydraulic barrier at the grounding line, and seawater never gets upstream,” says Robel.

There is one modeling exception, but it happened by chance. A 2019 [paper](#) from an international team of scientists compared a bunch of different models and noted that one accidentally produced the same kind of melt as intrusion, Robel says. (The reason some models diverge over these factors has to do with technical quirks regarding how to represent a glacier as a grid.) This paper showed intrusion could double the amount of glacier melt. “If seawater intrusion is causing melt upstream of the grounding line, the rates of sea level rise that you would project from places like Antarctica would be up to twice as much,” says Robel.

Specifically, without factoring in this kind of melting, the model projected that Antarctica’s glaciers might contribute between 3.5 and 6.7 inches to sea level rise by the year 2100. But with intrusion-like melting, that doubles to 8.3 and 11 inches. If his team’s new paper is correct in showing that seawater is indeed pushing past the grounding line and causing melt upstream, Robel says, “then it’s not crazy that these models could be producing much higher rates of sea level rise.” (It’s worth noting that even small changes in sea level are catastrophic, particularly in low-lying areas where a fraction of an inch [goes a long way](#).) The model that accounts for extra melting also happened to better explain extreme sea level rise in the past. Some 3 million years ago, for instance, the world was a [3 degrees Celsius warmer](#) (the Paris Agreement calls for keeping temperatures below 1.5 degrees C above preindustrial levels) and the seas [100 feet higher](#). “That’s been a puzzle, to explain exactly why sea levels were so much higher,” says Robel. Previously, he says, if you tried using ice sheet models that didn’t account for seawater intrusion and the associated glacial melt, “when you subjected them to these warmer temperatures, they would not melt enough to explain this much higher sea level during past warm periods.” (As an alternative, some other models can achieve the same result by greatly increasing the rate at which icebergs fracture at the edge of ice sheets.)

While Robel’s group was making a mathematical prediction, other scientists have also been accidentally finding [hints of evidence](#) of seawater intrusion from their fieldwork in Antarctica. Using ground-penetrating radar, they send pings through glaciers and analyze what bounces back, or they set off explosions in the ice and analyze the seismic data. Both are good ways to measure where the grounding line is: The signal is different if it bounces off underlying rock versus saltwater from the sea. If the grounding line is indeed acting as a barrier to keep out saltwater, you’d expect the signal to change as you cross the line.

But that signal doesn’t tend to change at the grounding line, says Robel. Instead, the change often becomes noticeable miles upstream. “I think there is this now diversity of evidence, particularly in West Antarctica, using different observational methods, different instrumental methods, that indicate that there are definitely places where it looks like there’s seawater and melt upstream of the grounding line,” he says.

	<p>Since these studies by other groups weren't actually looking for this signal, now the next step is to get teams out on these glaciers to do experiments specifically designed to hunt for seawater intrusion. "It's more of the beginning of a scientific story than it is the end of a scientific story—of, <i>Aha, we solved the problem!</i>" says Robel. "We think that there is something interesting here. Now we need to really go figure out whether this is something that's happening in the real world."</p>
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HEADLINE	02/17 Mysterious bubbles in Puget Sound
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/environment/mysterious-bubbles-in-puget-sound-uw-researchers-track-hundreds-of-seeping-gas-plumes/
GIST	<p>Tor Bjorklund, an oceanographer from the University of Washington, stood surrounded by blinking monitors on the research vessel Rachel Carson as it drifted through windswept waters during a routine trip on Lake Washington.</p> <p>"This is a pretty small plume," he said, pointing to a screen displaying measurements taken in December by a hydrophone, an aquatic device used to detect sound and movement in the ocean.</p> <p>The clunky but effective contraption was resting just outside on the ship's main deck.</p> <p>For years, Bjorklund and his colleagues have used sonar transducers — like the one attached to the hydrophone — mounted on the Carson's underside to detect and locate nearly 350 plumes of methane gas along the bottom of Puget Sound. Their findings were published in December.</p> <p>Natural sources of methane gas in aquatic estuaries are neither rare nor do they account for the largest source of methane emission, but never before had they been discovered in Puget Sound — and especially not in such great numbers.</p> <p>Scientists are investigating a possible link between the abundance and distribution of these methane plumes and seismic fault lines located directly beneath them. Now they seek more funding for research to better understand the plumes' biological and chemical composition.</p> <p>The question, Bjorklund said, is whether methane plumes serve as an indicator of seismic activity.</p> <p>"There's a lot left to learn," he said.</p> <p>The discovery itself was an accident.</p> <p>Researchers stumbled upon the plumes in 2011 when oceanographers aboard the Thomas G. Thompson, one of the UW's global research vessels, forgot to turn off the ship's sonar beams as it returned to port. The data it collected later revealed bubbles rising from plumes near the Kingston ferry terminal.</p> <p>After 19 trips spanning nearly a decade, scientists aboard the Carson were able to identify 349 methane plumes from Hood Canal to the Tacoma Narrows.</p> <p>But it seems they've only begun to scratch the surface.</p> <p>The hydrophone used on the Carson covers an area roughly 25 meters wide.</p> <p>If a proposal for more funding from the National Science Foundation is approved, Bjorklund said they would install a multi-beam system on the ship's hull to widen its underwater sonar vision.</p> <p>"I do think that 350 plumes is conservative," Bjorklund said. "I think it's a vast underestimation of how much methane is coming out."</p>

The plumes are scattered across Puget Sound but most concentrated near Kingston and Alki Point, according to the scientists' December report.

Paul Johnson, a UW oceanographer and lead author of the report, said the biological and tectonic implications are significant, but little is known about the plumes and their chemical composition.

"The difference in Puget Sound is that the methane is coming in from the seafloor, from the big faults out there," he said. "It tells you that there's an enormous amount of methane dissolved in Puget Sound seawater that gets emitted to the atmosphere ... and it tells you something about which of the branches (on fault lines) are allowing gas and fluid to pass upward through them."

On the Washington coast, methane vents were first discovered in 2009.

Ten years later, a comprehensive study by researchers from the UW and Oregon State University found more than 1,700 plumes about 30 miles from shore.

Previously, UW scientists believed rising ocean temperatures could be releasing frozen methane, but more recent research strongly suggests methane along the Pacific coast is emerging from old sites connected to shifts in tectonic fault lines, not warming temperatures.

Methane is a powerful heat absorber that, according to 2019 data from the Environmental Protection Agency, accounted for 10% of all greenhouse gas emissions in the United States.

"Any methane that's released, wherever its released, contributes to methane in the atmosphere, and because methane is a potent greenhouse gas, that contributes to global warming," said Brian Lamb, a professor at Washington State University whose research focuses on regional air quality and atmospheric pollutants.

The biggest sources of methane emission are agriculture — namely livestock and manure — natural gas or petroleum leaks and waste from homes, businesses and landfills.

While its life span in the atmosphere is much shorter than carbon dioxide, methane is 25 times more efficient over a 100-year period at trapping radiation.

Atmospheric methane concentration reached 1,900 parts per billion in 2021, according to research published in January by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, which is 2.6 times more than that which was seen during the pre-industrial era, according to the World Meteorological Organization.

Johnson estimated the 349 plumes in Puget Sound were collectively releasing about 50,000 metric tons of methane every year. If scientists are correct in assuming many plumes in Puget Sound remain uncounted, further research could provide a better understanding of how methane is impacting one of the state's most precious estuaries.

"Any time you find a new seep like this, it's certainly worthwhile to go back and collect new measurements," Lamb said. "It just adds another data point to what we know about methane."

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HEADLINE	02/17 Ship carrying luxury cars burning, adrift
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/17/world/europe/felicity-ace-vessel-fire.html
GIST	A mammoth cargo ship believed to be carrying thousands of vehicles including 1,100 Porsches was on fire and drifting off the coast of the Azores on Thursday after its 22 crew members were rescued from the vessel.

The fire broke out on Wednesday morning in the cargo hold of the ship, called the Felicity Ace, which had departed from Emden, Germany, on Feb. 10 and was scheduled to arrive in Davisville, R.I., on Wednesday, [according to a ship tracking website](#). The ship was about 200 miles from Terceira Island in the Azores, the Portuguese island territory, when Portuguese forces moved in on Wednesday to evacuate the crew.

No rescuers or crew members were injured in the “highly skilled and physically demanding” operation, which included a helicopter that whisked the crew members to the nearby Portuguese island of Faial, [according to the authorities](#).

It was unclear how much of the [650-foot, 60,000-ton](#) cargo ship’s inventory was lost in the fire and how the authorities would tend to the stricken ship. The shipping company could not immediately be reached.

The Drive, [an automotive website](#), reported that the Volkswagen Group estimated nearly 4,000 vehicles were on board, including 189 Bentleys. Emails sent to the Volkswagen Group were not immediately answered.

The fire comes as showrooms across the country are trying to meet consumer demand amid supply-chain problems caused partly by the pandemic. Low interest rates, higher savings rates and government stimulus payments have increased demand, while automakers have struggled to weather a shortage of computer chips.

Matt Farah, a car enthusiast and editor of [The Smoking Tire](#), had been waiting for his 2022 [frozen-berry metallic](#) Boxster Spyder, with a retail price of about \$123,000 and modified to his precise specifications, since August. “The best sports car of all time, hands down,” [he wrote](#).

He received [disappointing news](#) on Wednesday, he said: “I just got a call from my dealer. My car is now adrift, possibly on fire, in the middle of the ocean.”

In a statement on Thursday, Mr. Farah said that a Porsche representative confirmed that his car was on the boat and apologized for the inconvenience.

“That was yesterday, and I have not heard any updates since,” he said. “I’m glad no one was hurt in the fire and everyone is safe, which is the most important thing. I’m sure that whatever happens going forward, Porsche will do right by their customers.”

In a statement on Thursday evening, a spokeswoman for Porsche Cars North America said that 1,100 of the company’s cars were on board but that the fate of the vehicles was unknown. She encouraged customers worried about their car to contact their dealer.

“Our immediate thoughts are of relief that the 22 crew members of the merchant ship Felicity Ace are safe and well,” the statement said.

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HEADLINE	02/17 Family died in Calif. mountains: last plea
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/nation/family-that-died-in-california-mountains-made-desperate-plea/
GIST	<p>SACRAMENTO, Calif. — A family that died of heat exhaustion during a grueling summer hike in Northern California sent a last, desperate text pleading for help, authorities said Thursday.</p> <p>The Mariposa County Sheriff’s Office released information pulled from the cellphone of Jonathan Gerrish after months of work with an FBI forensics team.</p> <p>One text made shortly before noon on Aug. 15 to a person whose name wasn’t released asked: “Can you help us” and added: “No water or ver (over) heating with baby,” the San Francisco Chronicle reported.</p>

But the area had bad cellphone service and the text never went through. Neither did five phone calls to various people, investigators said.

Ellen Chung, 31, her 45-year-old husband, their 1-year-old daughter Aurelia “Miju” Chung-Gerrish, and their dog Oski were found dead on a hiking trail near the Merced River last August.

Their deaths baffled investigators. The case involved more than 30 law enforcement agencies that had painstakingly reviewed — and ruled out — causes such as murder, lightning strikes, poisoning from algae-tainted water, abandoned mines that might emit toxic gas, illegal drugs and suicide.

Last fall, investigators concluded that the family died of extreme heat stroke. Temperatures that afternoon reached 109 degrees Fahrenheit (43 Celsius) in the steep mountain terrain and the family had run out of water. A wildfire had burned off any shade canopy.

Officials found the family two days later after relatives had reported them missing. The family had hiked 6.4 miles (2.5 kilometers) with the baby in a backpack-type carrier. They were 1.6 miles (2.5 kilometers) away from their car.

The family had an 85-ounce (2.5-liter) water container with them that was empty.

The cellphone was found in Gerrish’s pocket. Beginning shortly after noon, Gerrish and Chung tried to call and text for help several times, according to the Sheriff’s Office.

Five phone calls — four of them made in rapid succession — went to several phone numbers but the family didn’t call 911, the Sheriff’s Office said.

The first call was made at 12:09 p.m. Beginning at 12:35 p.m., the family made the final four calls in rapid succession, investigators said.

However, none of the calls connected.

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HEADLINE	02/17 Study: 46% bald eagles w/lead poisoning
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Technology/wireStory/half-us-bald-eagles-suffer-lead-poisoning-82961570
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON -- America’s national bird is more beleaguered than previously believed, with nearly half of bald eagles tested across the U.S. showing signs of chronic lead exposure, according to a study published Thursday.</p> <p>While the bald eagle population has rebounded from the brink of extinction since the U.S. banned the pesticide DDT in 1972, harmful levels of toxic lead were found in the bones of 46% of bald eagles sampled in 38 states from California to Florida, researchers reported in the journal Science.</p> <p>Similar rates of lead exposure were found in golden eagles, which scientists say means the raptors likely consumed carrion or prey contaminated by lead from ammunition or fishing tackle.</p> <p>The blood, bones, feathers and liver tissue of 1,210 eagles sampled from 2010 to 2018 were examined to assess chronic and acute lead exposure.</p> <p>“This is the first time for any wildlife species that we’ve been able to evaluate lead exposure and population level consequences at a continental scale,” said study co-author Todd Katzner, a wildlife biologist at U.S. Geological Survey in Boise, Idaho. “It’s sort of stunning that nearly 50% of them are getting repeatedly exposed to lead.”</p>

Lead is a neurotoxin that even in low doses impairs an eagle's balance and stamina, reducing its ability to fly, hunt and reproduce. In high doses, lead causes seizures, breathing difficulty and death.

The study estimated that lead exposure reduced the annual population growth of bald eagles by 4% and golden eagles by 1%.

Bald eagles are one of America's most celebrated conservation success stories, and the birds were removed from the U.S. Endangered Species List in 2007.

But scientists say that high lead levels are still a concern. Besides suppressing eagle population growth, lead exposure reduces their resilience in facing future challenges, such as climate change or infectious diseases.

"When we talk about recovery, it's not really the end of the story — there are still threats to bald eagles," said Krysten Schuler, a wildlife disease ecologist at Cornell University's College of Veterinary Medicine, who was not involved in the study.

Previous studies have shown high lead exposure in specific regions, but not across the country. The blood samples from live eagles in the new study were taken from birds trapped and studied for other reasons; the bone, feather and liver samples came from eagles killed by collisions with vehicles or powerlines, or other misfortunes.

"Lead is present on the landscape and available to these birds more than we previously thought," said co-author Vince Slabe, a research wildlife biologist at the nonprofit Conservation Science Global. "A lead fragment the size of the end of a pin is large enough to cause mortality in an eagle."

The researchers also found elevated levels of lead exposure in fall and winter, coinciding with hunting season in many states.

During these months, eagles scavenge on carcasses and gut piles left by hunters, which are often riddled with shards of lead shot or bullet fragments.

Slabe said the upshot of the research was not to disparage hunters. "Hunters are one of the best conservation groups in this country," he said, noting that fees and taxes paid by hunters help fund state wildlife agencies, and that he also hunted deer and elk in Montana.

However, Slabe said he hopes the findings provide an opportunity to "talk to hunters about this issue in a clear manner" and that more hunters will voluntarily switch to non-lead ammunition such as copper bullets.

Lead ammunition for waterfowl hunting was banned in 1991, due to concerns about contamination of waterways, and wildlife authorities encouraged the use of nontoxic steel shot. However, lead ammunition is still common for upland bird hunting and big game hunting.

The amount of lead exposure varies regionally, with highest levels found in the Central Flyway, the new study found.

At the University of Minnesota's Raptor Center, veterinarian and executive director Victoria Hall said that "85 to 90% of the eagles that come into our hospital have some level of lead in their blood," and X-rays often show fragments of lead bullets in their stomachs.

Eagles with relatively low levels can be treated, she said, but those with high exposure can't be saved.

Laura Hale, board president at nonprofit Badger Run Wildlife Rehab in Klamath County, Oregon, said she'll never forget the first eagle she encountered with acute lead poisoning, in 2018. She had answered a resident's call about an eagle that seemed immobile in underbrush and brought it to the clinic.

The young bald eagle was wrapped in a blanket, unable to breathe properly, let alone stand or fly.

“There is something hideous when you watch an eagle struggling to breathe because of lead poisoning – it's really, really harsh,” she said, her voice shaking. That eagle went into convulsions, and died within 48 hours.

Lead on the landscape affects not only eagles, but also many other birds — including hawks, vultures, ravens, swans and geese, said Jennifer Cedarleaf, avian director at Alaska Raptor Center, a nonprofit wildlife rescue in Sitka, Alaska.

Because eagles are very sensitive to lead, are so well-studied and attract so much public interest, “bald eagles are like the canary in the coal mine,” she said. “They are the species that tells us: We have a bit of problem.”

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Crime, Criminals

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HEADLINE	02/17 Texas DA indicts 19 Austin police officers
SOURCE	https://www.newsmax.com/us/police-indictments-riots-texas/2022/02/17/id/1057363/
GIST	<p>A radical Texas district attorney funded by Hungarian-born American billionaire and liberal activist George Soros announced the indictment of a stunning 19 police officers for their efforts to quell the riots during the summer of 2020.</p> <p>A Texas grand jury indicted 19 Austin, Texas, police officers on charges of aggravated assault with a deadly weapon for their actions during 2020 protests over racial injustice that spread nationwide following the killing of George Floyd, sources told The Associated Press.</p> <p>Austin Police Association President Ken Cassidy confirmed 19 officers are facing charges.</p> <p>José Garza, the district attorney for Travis County, which includes Austin, spoke to journalists Thursday about the grand jury investigation. It has been widely reported Garza has received up to \$600,000 from the Soros-funded Texas Justice & Public Safety PAC in the 2020 election cycle.</p> <p>"Our community is safer when our community trusts enforcement," Garza said Thursday after the grand jury indictments. "When it believes law enforcement follows that law and protects the people who live here. There cannot be trust if there is no accountability when law enforcement breaks the law."</p> <p>Cassidy called the move "devastating" for law enforcement in the city, but also said he is confident no officer will be convicted. He criticized Garza, calling the investigation politically motivated.</p> <p>"DA Garza ran on a platform to indict police officers and has not missed the opportunity to ruin lives and careers simply to fulfill a campaign promise," Cassidy said.</p> <p>It ranks among the most indictments on a single police department in the U.S. over tactics used by officers during the widespread protests — methods that led to the resignation or ouster of several police chiefs across the country.</p> <p>Word of the indictments came hours after Austin city leaders approved paying \$10 million to two people injured by police in the protests, including a college student who suffered brain damage after an officer shot him with a beanbag round.</p>

Combined, the charges and settlements amounted to conservative Texas' liberal capital of 960,000 people taking some of its biggest actions as criticism still simmers over its handling of the protests, which intensified pressure on then-Police Chief Brian Manley to eventually step down.

Prosecutors have not identified any of the officers facing charges. Texas law requires that an indictment remain secret until an officer has been arrested. Aggravated assault with a deadly weapon could carry a sentence of up to 20 years in prison.

Garza said his office prosecutes anybody who causes harm "regardless of who causes it."

Austin Chief of Police Joseph Chacon, who took the job after Manley left, said he respects the grand jury process but was "extremely disappointed" to hear the district attorney announce anticipated indictments of his officers.

Chacon stressed his command staff had prepared officers to face hundreds of people when thousands actually showed up to protests that he said were at times "righteous and violent."

"I am not aware of any conduct, that given the circumstances that the officers were working under, would rise to the level of a criminal violation by these officers," Chacon said.

But beanbag rounds fired by officers did not always perform "in the manner anticipated," Chacon said, and his agency now prohibits the use of "less lethal munitions in crowd-control situations."

The settlements approved Thursday are among the largest paid to people who were injured by police across the U.S. during massive protests that followed Floyd's death.

The largest of the Austin settlements gives \$8 million to Justin Howell, who was 20 years old when police shot him with a beanbag round. Family members told the AP following the incident that Howell suffered a cracked skull and brain damage, leaving him in critical condition for multiple days.

The city will also pay \$2 million to Anthony Evans, who was 26 when an Austin police officer shot him with a beanbag round in a separate incident, which resulted in extensive medical treatment in his jaw.

Austin Mayor Steve Adler said the settlements "remind us of a real difficult and painful moment in our city." A representative for the Howell family did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

It is the latest reflection of how, two years after the protests that swept across the country, cities are still addressing the injuries and tactics used by police. Earlier this month, prosecutors announced charges against two Dallas police officers accused of injuring demonstrators after firing less lethal munitions.

After the protests in Austin, then-police Chief Manley later said Howell was not the intended target after an altercation in a crowd, which he said involved people who threw objects at a line of officers. Authorities have said that led to the officers firing at the mass of protesters from above.

David Frost, who captured on video the moments after Howell was shot, told the AP that he saw protesters throwing fist-sized rocks and water bottles at the line of police on an overpass. Then he saw Howell fall. He was bleeding heavily and went into a seizure, Frost said at the time.

The settlements are the second and third payments awarded among a dozen lawsuits filed in Austin that have claimed injuries from the protests. Earlier this month, The Austin American-Statesman reported that a \$150,000 settlement was approved for a woman named Ariana Chavez, who was shot in the head with less lethal munition resulting in a concussion.

At least 19 people were hospitalized in Austin following the protests.

	Eleven officers were disciplined for their actions in the early summer protests, with seven additional officers placed on administrative duty.
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HEADLINE	02/17 Study: 1-in-4 women in domestic violence
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2022/02/17/women-violence-domestic-abuse-who-lancet-study/
GIST	<p>More than 1 in 4 women in the world have experienced domestic violence in their lifetimes, according to a study published Wednesday.</p> <p>The study, in the Lancet medical journal, used statistics from the World Health Organization’s global database on the prevalence of violence against women from before the coronavirus pandemic, 2000 to 2018.</p> <p>It found that 27 percent of those ages 15 to 49 had experienced physical or sexual violence by intimate long-term partners.</p> <p>“Intimate partner violence affects the lives of millions of women, children, families and societies worldwide,” the study’s senior author, Claudia García-Moreno, a WHO public health researcher, said in a statement.</p> <p>“Although this study took place before the COVID-19 pandemic, the numbers are alarming and research has shown the pandemic exacerbated issues leading to intimate partner violence such as isolation, depression and anxiety, and alcohol use, as well as reducing access to support services,” she said, calling the need for solutions “vital and urgent.”</p> <p>The study found the highest prevalence of such reported abuse was in the Oceania region (49 percent), which covers Australia, New Zealand and Fiji among other countries, followed by central sub-Saharan Africa (44 percent). The regions with the lowest estimates were central Asia and central Europe, it found.</p> <p>Rebecca Hitchen, head of policy at the End Violence Against Women Coalition, told The Washington Post: “This data highlights what we’ve long known: that violence against women and girls is ubiquitous across the world. While it is not a surprise, it is of huge concern.”</p> <p>“Given the stigma and victim blaming that is an almost universal experience for survivors, we know the true prevalence and scale is likely to be even greater, as many cannot or do not feel able to disclose their experiences,” she added.</p> <p>The study looked at more than 350 surveys and studies conducted from 2000 to 2018, covering 161 countries and areas representing 90 percent of the global population of women and girls, it said. It defines intimate partner violence as physical, sexual or psychologically harmful behaviors.</p> <p>The authors acknowledged the limitations of surveys based on self-reporting and gaps among some groups, such as those living with disabilities, Indigenous people, migrants and those in same-sex partnerships. “Given the sensitive and stigmatised nature of the issue, the true prevalence of violence that these women are subjected to by an intimate partner is likely to be even higher,” the study said.</p> <p>They also drew attention to the “high levels” of violence experienced by adolescent girls and young women, calling the data “alarming,” with about 24 percent of those ages 15 to 19 having already experienced violence at least once, the study found.</p> <p>“Adolescence and early adulthood are important life stages when the foundations for healthy relationships are built.</p> <p>The violence these young women experience has long-lasting impacts on their health and well-being,” said study author Lynnmarie Sardinha, a public health researcher for the WHO. She called for more investment in community- and school-based interventions to promote gender equality.</p>

Isabelle Younane, head of policy at the British charity Women's Aid, which focuses on domestic abuse against women and children, agreed that the findings were likely to be "just the tip of the iceberg" because many cases of abuse go unreported. Concerns over stigmatization and distrust of police and court systems, along with the fear of not being believed, were among the common reasons women do not speak out, she told The Post.

"The global prevalence of violence against women is both saddening and intolerable," Younane said. "We must make sure that lifesaving specialist domestic abuse services are properly funded, as well as tackling the root causes of domestic abuse: challenging sexist attitudes, promoting healthy relationships, and driving a real shift in prevention."

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HEADLINE	02/18 Political backlash: violent crime rates rising
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/18/us/politics/prosecutors-midterms-crime.html
GIST	<p>Four years ago, progressive prosecutors were in the sweet spot of Democratic politics. Aligned with the growing Black Lives Matter movement but pragmatic enough to draw establishment support, they racked up wins in cities across the country.</p> <p>Today, a political backlash is brewing. With violent crime rates rising in some cities and elections looming, their attempts to roll back the tough-on-crime policies of the 1990s are increasingly under attack — from familiar critics on the right, but also from onetime allies within the Democratic Party.</p> <p>In San Francisco, District Attorney Chesa Boudin is facing a recall vote in June, stoked by criticism from the city's Democratic mayor. In Los Angeles, the county district attorney, George Gascón, is trying to fend off a recall effort as some elected officials complain about new guidelines eliminating the death penalty and the prosecution of juveniles as adults. Manhattan's new district attorney, Alvin Bragg, quickly ran afoul of the new Democratic mayor, Eric Adams, and his new police commissioner over policies that critics branded too lenient.</p> <p>The combative resistance is a harsh turn for a group of leaders whom progressives hailed as an electoral success story. Rising homicide and violent crime rates have even Democrats in liberal cities calling for more law enforcement, not less — forcing prosecutors to defend their policies against their own allies. And traditional boosters on the left aren't rushing to their aid, with some saying they've soured on the officials they once backed.</p> <p>"I think that whole honeymoon period lasts about five or six hours," said Wesley Bell, the prosecuting attorney for St. Louis County in Missouri, who is seeking re-election this fall.</p> <p>Mr. Bell, a former city councilman in Ferguson, Mo., is part of the group of prosecutors elected on a promise to address racial disparities in the criminal justice system. Most support eliminating the death penalty and cash bail, limiting prosecutions for low-level, nonviolent offenses and scaling back sentences.</p> <p>In a show of political strength, progressive prosecutors in Chicago and Philadelphia handily defeated challengers in recent years. Mr. Bell's re-election bid in November is one of several races being watched for signs that voters' views have shifted on those policies as violent crime has risen and racial justice protests have fallen out of the headlines.</p> <p>Homicide rates spiked in 2020 and continued to rise last year, albeit less slowly, hitting levels not seen since the 1990s. Other violent crimes also are up. Both increases are occurring nationally, in cities with progressive prosecutors and in cities without.</p> <p>That's left no clear evidence linking progressive policies to these trends, but critics have been quick to make the connection, suggesting that prosecutors have let offenders walk and created an expectation that low-level offenses won't be charged. Those arguments have landed on voters and city leaders already grappling with a scourge of pandemic-related ills — including mental health care needs and housing shortages, rising drug use, even traffic deaths.</p>

Last week, [a Quinnipiac University poll](#) of registered voters in New York City found that 74 percent of respondents considered crime a “very serious” problem — the largest share since the survey began asking the question in 1999 and more than 20 percentage points greater than the previous high, which was recorded in January 2016.

Politicians are heeding those concerns. In New York, Mr. Adams, a Democrat, has promised to crack down on crime, and his police commissioner, Keechant Sewell, [slammed Mr. Bragg’s proposals](#) as threatening the safety of police officers and the public. In San Francisco, Mayor London Breed has become an outspoken critic of Mr. Boudin’s approach, which emphasizes social services over policing.

“This is not working,” Ms. Breed said recently on The New York Times podcast “Sway.” “We’ve added all these additional resources — the street crisis response team, the ambassadors, the services, the buildings we purchase, the hotels we purchase, the resources. We’ve added all these things to deal with food insecurity. All these things. Yet people are still being physically harmed and killed.”

The criticisms from two prominent Black mayors are particularly biting. In their liberal cities, the leaders’ nuanced complaints have far more influence with voters than familiar attacks from Republicans or police unions. Both mayors have argued that the minority communities that want racism rooted from the justice system also want more robust policing and prosecutions.

President Biden, who was one of the architects of the tough-on-crime criminal justice overhaul of the 1990s, recently spoke highly of Mr. Adams’s focus on crime prevention. Some prosecutors and their allies took that as sign that the Democratic establishment is digging in on a centrist approach to criminal justice reform.

Mr. Biden’s comments came as the Democratic Party worried about retaining the support of moderate suburban voters in midterm elections this year. Many Democratic lawmakers and strategists believe that protest slogans like “defund the police” hurt the party in the 2020 elections — particularly in Congressional swing districts and in Senate races. Republican candidates, eager to retake control of Congress in November, [already have run advertisements](#) casting Democrats as soft on crime.

Most progressive prosecutors oppose the calls to gut police department budgets, but that is a nuance often missed. At one liberal philanthropic group, some newer givers have said they will not donate to any criminal justice groups — or to the campaigns of progressive prosecutors — because they don’t want to endorse defunding the police, according to a person who connects donors to criminal justice causes, and who insisted on anonymity to discuss private conversations.

Samuel Sinyangwe, an activist who has been involved in several organizations pushing progressive prosecutors, said prosecutors hadn’t been as forceful as [law enforcement unions](#) in selling their solutions to rising violence in cities.

“Police are spending a lot of money convincing people the appropriate response to that is more policing and incarceration,” he said. “I think that individual cities and counties are having to push back against that narrative. But I think they’re struggling to do that right now.”

In San Francisco, Mr. Boudin argued that the effort to recall him was fueled by politics, not voters’ worries about crime. He pointed to the Republican megadonors who have funded the recall efforts and said Ms. Breed has a political incentive to see him ousted — he beat her preferred candidate for district attorney.

“These are Republican talking points,” Mr. Boudin said. “And it’s tremendously destructive to the Democratic Party and the long-term progress that the party is making at the local and national level around public safety and criminal justice to allow a few folks dissatisfied with a local election to undermine that progress.”

Mary Jung, a Democratic activist leading the recall campaign, said those who painted the efforts as fueled by conservatives or moderates were missing the point. Many of their supporters, she said, are lifelong liberal Democrats.

Those voters, she said, don't view the effort to recall Mr. Boudin, who was elected in 2019, as a broad shift away from progressive policies, but as a local response in a community that feels unsafe. She cited several [attacks against Asian immigrants](#) and [incidents of shoplifting](#) as the sort of crimes that have rattled residents, regardless of political ideology.

In another sign of Democrats' discontent, San Francisco voters [ousted three progressive members](#) of the Board of Education in a recall election driven by pandemic angst.

"Over 80,000 San Franciscans signed our petition and we only needed 53,000 signatures," Ms. Jung said. "There's only 33,000 registered Republicans in the city. So, you know, you do the math."

Some progressives warn against ignoring people's fears. Kim Foxx, the state's attorney for Cook County, which includes Chicago and some of the country's most violence-plagued communities, said that any dismissive rhetoric could make prosecutors risk looking out of touch.

"You can't dismiss people," Ms. Foxx said. "I live in Chicago, where we hit 800 murders last year, and that represents 800 immediate families and thousands of people who are impacted."

Ms. Foxx faced a well-funded opponent and [won re-election in 2020](#), as did Philadelphia's district attorney, Larry Krasner, the following year. Those victories [show the resilient support for progressive ideas](#), Mr. Krasner said, warning the Democratic Party not to abandon them.

"Put criminal justice reform on the ballot in every election in almost every jurisdiction, and what you're going to see is a surge in turnout," Mr. Krasner said. "And that turnout will overwhelmingly be unlikely voters, reluctant voters, brand-new voters, people who are not connected to what they see as governmental dysfunction between the parties — but they are connected to an issue that has affected their communities."

But there are signs that attitudes about overhauling the criminal justice system are changing even among progressives. Many activists have shifted their focus away from electoral politics and toward policies they think address root of the problem, such as reducing the number of police and abolishing prisons.

That "makes it very difficult to even defend or support particular prosecutors, because at the end of the day, they're still putting people in jail," Mr. Sinyangwe said.

In 2020, Mr. Bell, the St. Louis prosecutor, faced the ire of the same progressive activists who had helped elect him. That July, he announced that his renewed investigation into the 2014 fatal police shooting of Michael Brown Jr., a young Black man, which ignited weeks of protests, had delivered the same results: no charges for the officer who killed him.

Mr. Brown's mother [denounced Mr. Bell's investigation](#). Speaking to reporters then, Mr. Bell said the announcement was "one of the most difficult things I've had to do as an elected official."

Asked to discuss the incident and the investigation, Mr. Bell declined.

Josie Duffy Rice, the former president of The Appeal, a news outlet focused on criminal justice, said that in some ways the voters were learning the limitations of the progressive prosecutor's role.

"Prosecutors have the power to cause a lot of problems," Ms. Duffy Rice said. "But not enough power to solve problems."

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SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/law-enforcement-zeroing-in-on-burglaries-and-auto-thefts-at-car-dealerships
GIST	<p>AUBURN, Wash. - Auburn police said there is an uptick in burglaries and auto thefts at car dealerships.</p> <p>Detective Damon Hewin said in a three-week period, there were 15 to 20 vehicles stolen from dealerships in the City of Auburn alone.</p> <p>"I'm learning that there are incidents in Fife and Renton, obviously here in Auburn, Federal Way and Bellevue," said Detective Hewin.</p> <p>In fact, Detective Hewin said he was watching FOX 13 News on Tuesday when he saw the report about expensive cars being stolen from an auto body shop in Bellevue, and he noticed the suspects gained entry into the building similarly to other incidents he had been investigating.</p> <p>Bellevue police are investigating after a Porsche was stolen from auto shop overnight.</p> <p>According to Bellevue police, the suspects used a white Chevy Cruze to ram through the rolling doors of the shop to get inside.</p> <p>"When I saw that, I was like, wait a minute. That's similar to what I've been seeing in my cases here in Auburn, so I wonder if that's related," said Detective Hewin who then made a call to Bellevue police. "We believe that some of the same individuals that are involved in the Bellevue incident are involved in an incident here in Auburn a few nights ago."</p> <p>Arianna Bigelow reached out to FOX 13 News and said their dealerships in Auburn and Fife have also been targeted.</p> <p>"We've actually had three cars stolen from January 26 through February 6," said Bigelow. "They actually used a stolen vehicle as a battering ram to prop open our front gates, and back that up into our glass service stores, and then used it again as a battering ram to force those doors open."</p> <p>Bigelow said she's in touch with area dealerships, and believe thieves are going after them every night in Tacoma, Fife or Auburn.</p> <p>"I mean, we've talked to stores that have had anywhere from 40 to 100 keys stolen in one night," said Bigelow. "The fact that this is happening night after night after night, and they're all following the same pattern."</p> <p>Detective Hewin said investigators are actively working the case and ask anyone with information to call the Auburn PD Tip Line at 253-288-7403.</p> <p>"This is not just Auburn working alone. If you're out there, and you're watching, we're going to find you," said Detective Hewin.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/17 NY: 10 arrests; unemployment benefits fraud
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/nation-world/feds-group-got-millions-in-pandemic-unemployment-fraud
GIST	<p>NEW YORK (AP) — Authorities made arrests from New York to Delaware to California Thursday as they rounded up 10 men accused of fraudulently reaping more than \$4 million in unemployment benefits during the coronavirus pandemic.</p> <p>They and others, including an 11th defendant who's still at large, used more than 800 other people's identities to file claims in New York, the Brooklyn U.S. attorney's office said Thursday.</p> <p>"Unemployment got us workin' a lot," quipped a YouTube music video that featured five of the men, according to prosecutors.</p>

Starting shortly after the federal government expanded unemployment benefits in March 2020, the ring filed nearly 1,000 claims to New York's Labor Department, prosecutors said. According to an indictment, the men used other people's identities but their own or associates' addresses to get the benefits sent to them on debit cards, then made cash withdrawals with the cards.

Eight were arrested in New York City, one in Delaware and one in California.

Unemployment fraud has been a nationwide problem during the pandemic, as benefit applications overwhelmed state unemployment agencies. Criminals were able to buy stolen identity data on the dark web and use it to file a heap of phony claims.

The federal Labor Department has said that about \$87 billion in pandemic unemployment benefits could have been [paid improperly nationwide](#), with a significant portion attributable to fraud. An Associated Press review in March 2021 found that estimates ranged from \$11 billion in fraudulent payments in California to several hundred thousand dollars in states such as Alaska and Wyoming.

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HEADLINE	02/17 No-bail release of violent suspect
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/local/seattle-bartender-outraged-over-no-bail-release-of-violent-suspect
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — A bartender in Seattle is outraged that the man accused of slashing her in the face was let out of jail by a judge on the promise he'll show up for his next court date.</p> <p>Surveillance video captured the brutality of that attack and Felicite Ogilvy questions her safety knowing the man arrested is back on the streets.</p> <p>The attack happened in late December when the mandate to check proof of COVID-19 vaccination took a violent turn at Joe's Bar and Grill. A man who didn't have his card was told to leave by Ogilvy, who was bartending that night. However, instead that man lashed out and hit Ogilvy in the face with a stick that had a sharp piece of metal attached to one end.</p> <p>It took six weeks for police to track the suspect down, but at his first court appearance last week, a judge let Marques Echols go free on personal recognizance.</p> <p>"So he's out walking right now," Ogilvy said. "Who knows where he is? He was in hiding for a month and a half. Then after they get him they just release him? That just made no sense to me."</p> <p>Prosecutors asked for \$75,000 bail based on the severity of the crime, but the judge opted not to keep Echols in custody.</p> <p>"We realized pretty clearly that this is a felony assault case and we charged it that way," said Casey McNerthney, a spokesperson for the King County Prosecuting Attorney's Office. "We understand that the victim was concerned. We were too. That's why we wanted him to be held in jail."</p> <p>Ogilvy has undergone surgery and is scheduled for more to help heal the wound that initially required 31 sutures to close up.</p> <p>The judge did impose a no-contact order on Echols but Ogilvy said it brings her little comfort.</p> <p>"I don't feel safe and I don't feel safe with our justice system, with just letting them out immediately," she said.</p> <p>Ogilvy said she loves her job and her customers but feels she paid too high a price to enforce COVID safety measures she questioned from the get-go.</p>

	<p>“I’m upset over this whole situation because if we weren’t required with the vaccine to ask about about their card or to even have to look at it, this wouldn’t have happened,” Ogilvy said.</p> <p>Echols does not have any prior criminal history in Washington state, though now he is charged with assault and is scheduled to enter a plea at the end of the month.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/17 Police drone tracks down burglary suspect
SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/police-use-drone-track-down-lake-stevens-burglary-suspect/DQO7PR4CGBERFEDCBFUWFAG7ZU/
GIST	<p>LAKE STEVENS, Wash. — A suspect seen running from a burglarized convenience store in Lake Stevens was quickly found by an officer operating a drone.</p> <p>At 2:48 a.m., Lake Stevens police Corporal Bryant was driving by the Lake Stevens Mini Mart when he saw someone running from the closed business.</p> <p>When Bryant investigated, he saw the front glass door had been shattered and items from the store were on the side of the building, according to a post on the police department’s Facebook page.</p> <p>Bryant immediately sent up the department’s drone. Within a few minutes, he located the suspect under a tarp at a nearby property.</p> <p>Officers detained the suspect, who was later booked into jail.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/17 Covid cases rise DOC corrections center
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/health/covid-cases-climb-at-larch-corrections-center/
GIST	<p>The Washington Department of Corrections reported 55 active COVID-19 cases Wednesday among incarcerated individuals at Larch Corrections Center.</p> <p>The number of active cases among staff — six — has remained the same since Monday, according to Wednesday’s DOC bulletin.</p> <p>The minimum-security prison near Yacolt was placed on facility-wide outbreak status Feb. 7 after four inmates in the living unit tested positive. Incarcerated individuals who test positive are being temporarily relocated to the Elkhorn Unit to help stop the virus’s spread, according to the department.</p> <p>On Monday, the DOC reported 41 active cases among incarcerated individuals.</p> <p>To date, 336 incarcerated individuals and 65 staff members have tested positive, according to the DOC. The majority of those cases came during an outbreak in late 2020, with more than 90 percent of the inmate population testing positive.</p> <p>In December, the most recent data available online, Larch’s average daily population was 222, with a capacity of 240.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/17 Animal abuse can be domestic violence
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/law-justice/animal-abuse-can-be-domestic-violence-wa-supreme-court-rules/
GIST	OLYMPIA, Wash. (AP) — The Washington Supreme Court on Thursday unanimously confirmed that animal abuse can constitute domestic violence.

	<p>The court issued its ruling in the case of Charmarke Abdi-Issa, a Tukwila man who was convicted of animal abuse with a domestic violence designation for savagely beating his girlfriend's dog — a Chihuahua-dachshund mix named Mona — to death in a Seattle parking lot in 2018.</p> <p>He was sentenced to 18 months in prison — 12 for animal abuse and an extra six because the attack traumatized a woman who saw him pounding on the yelping dog and booting it into some bushes.</p> <p>Responding officers took Mona to a veterinary clinic, where the animal died.</p> <p>The justices unanimously held that the purpose of the domestic violence designation is to enforce existing criminal statutes in a way that ensures victims are protected. It allows courts to issue a post-conviction no-contact order between the perpetrator and the victim.</p> <p>While the court unanimously agreed that the domestic violence designation was properly applied in Abdi-Issa's case, two justices — Debra Stephens and Barbara Madsen — disagreed with the majority's decision to uphold the extra six months he received for traumatizing a witness.</p> <p>Stephens and Madsen said that aggravating factor must apply only when a crime has a destructive and foreseeable impact on a specific person or group of people besides the victim — not simply because the crime is committed in public and a witness is traumatized.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/17 Tacoma PD pursuing leads vehicle assault
SOURCE	https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/local/crime/article258480908.html
GIST	<p>While leaders from city and county government met with business people and citizens at the LeMay - America's Car Museum last month to discuss crime and safety in Tacoma, a vehicular assault played out in front of dozens of witnesses outside.</p> <p>A driver in a pickup truck accelerated toward a crowd of protesters gathered on the sidewalk around 6:10 p.m. Jan. 26 and struck 49-year-old Theresa Evans, who had joined the group just minutes earlier while on her way to a math tutoring appointment.</p> <p>Three weeks later, Evans is recovering from pelvis surgery and working to regain strength in her legs at Harborview Medical Center in Seattle. The driver has not been identified as police continue to investigate.</p> <p>"I don't want people hurt who are going to protests," Evans said. "I want protests to be peaceful and kind."</p> <p>There are plenty of witnesses to the assault and video of the vehicle hustling away from the scene, but none of it points to the identity of the person behind the wheel, police say.</p> <p>Tacoma Police Department spokesperson Wendy Haddow said detectives know the license plate number of the pickup truck, but they have yet to recover it.</p> <p>Asked if detectives had spoken with the registered owner, Haddow could only say that the investigation is ongoing.</p> <p>Haddow said detectives need someone who can ID the driver, clear video that would ID the driver or some other evidence that would tie them to the time and location of the crime to make an arrest.</p> <p>Detectives have spoken with witnesses, canvassed the area for video of the truck and followed up on every tip they've received since a bulletin was put out on the assault. That hasn't led police to the vehicle that struck Evans, but Haddow said she still thinks there's a good possibility police will be able to make an arrest.</p> <p>She said detectives still have active leads they are following.</p>

Heath Breneman, 47, was standing on the sidewalk talking to Evans when she was struck by the car. When she went to the ground, Breneman went to her side and held her with his knees against her back to try to keep her still.

Breneman reached out to the detective investigating the case and said he was told that unless he can ID the driver, there wasn't much that could be done.

He wasn't satisfied with that answer. "It's inconceivable to me that they haven't impounded the vehicle at least and questioned the driver," he said.

Speaking over the phone from her hospital bed, Evans struggled to recall the moments leading up to the assault. She hit her head when she was knocked to the ground and suffered a concussion along with an arterial bleed. Her head had to be stapled.

Evans lives on Tacoma's Eastside with her husband and teenage son.

She keeps up on local government decisions that affect the rights of people experiencing homelessness, and when she saw the protesters gathered outside the LeMay on Jan. 26 holding signs and banners in support of homeless people, she stopped to join.

"Before I had the chance of saying hello, that's when I was hit," Evans said. "I don't remember anything after that." Breneman said Evans was there for less than two minutes before he heard the sound of an accelerating engine and saw headlights pointed directly at him.

"It made straight for us and crossed over out of the lane across the bike lane in order to line up and hit her without actually going up on the curb," Breneman said. "It was precise driving."

Evans said she was shocked by the assault, but she felt that something like it was going to happen. She isn't sure what gave her that feeling, but she'd been avoiding going out as often lately because she didn't want her or her family to get hurt.

She is likely not the only person feeling less safe in Tacoma. In 2021, the city saw about 17 percent more violent crimes than in 2020, according to an end of year crime report from TPD. Of the 5,242 violent crimes reported last year, 4,813 were assaults.

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HEADLINE	02/17 Coast Guard seizes \$1B cocaine, meth
SOURCE	https://www.cbsnews.com/news/coast-guard-seizes-illegal-drugs-cocaine-marijuana/
GIST	<p>The U.S. Coast Guard said Thursday it has seized thousands of pounds of cocaine and marijuana worth more than \$1 billion. The drugs were offloaded at Port Everglades in Florida.</p> <p>Crews from nine U.S. ships seized 54,500 pounds of cocaine and 15,800 pounds of marijuana, worth approximately \$1.06 billion, in the international waters of the Eastern Pacific Ocean and Caribbean Sea, the Coast Guard said.</p> <p>Meanwhile, Coast Guard said its crew onboard the Cutter James set a record for the "largest single cocaine interdiction at 10,915 pounds, worth \$206.4 million, and the largest single marijuana interdiction at 3,962 pounds, worth \$3.59 million, which is the greatest amount of contraband interdicted during an Eastern Pacific patrol," while on their 90-day patrol.</p> <p>It is not clear whether anyone was charged.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/17 Report: sexual assaults military academies
SOURCE	https://www.cbsnews.com/news/sexual-assault-us-military-academies-pentagon-report/

GIST	<p>There were 131 incidents of sexual assault reported at the military service academies in the 2020-2021 academic year, according to the Pentagon's annual report on sexual harassment and violence that was released Thursday. It's the highest number since the Pentagon began tracking the data.</p> <p>The report showed a 7% increase since the 2018-2019 academic year, the most recent year cadets and midshipmen were on campus for the full year before COVID-19.</p> <p>The Acting Director of the Sexual Assault Response Prevention Office Dr. Nate Galbreath said in a call with reporters there could be two reasons the number of reports has increased since 2015.</p> <p>"Either that there was more crime to report or that people overall are encouraged and feel more confident coming forward and making those reports," Galbreath said.</p> <p>"What I can tell you is at the academies we are, we are putting all the policies in place that we can encourage greater reporting because again, greater reporting of the crime will help more victims and also gives us the opportunity to hold offenders appropriately accountable."</p> <p>During the 2019-2020 year, there were only 88 reports of sexual assault, but officials said when presenting the data last year that this was not sign of a significant decrease since the number of reports was on pace to match previous years before students went home because of COVID-19.</p> <p>For the 2020-2021 year, the most significant increase among the academies came at West Point. West Point had 46 reports of sexual assault in 2020-2021, up from 23 the previous year. The Naval Academy had 33 reports of sexual assault, and the Air Force Academy had 52.</p> <p>During his first few weeks at the Pentagon, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin directed the creation of an Independent Review Commission on Sexual Assault in the Military. The commission finished its work in the fall of last year and issued 82 recommendations.</p> <p>The military service academies will implement some of those recommendations in the coming years. One significant change is that prosecution decisions for sexual assault will shift from the academy superintendents to a special trial counsel, in an effort to eliminate any assumed bias.</p> <p>The Sexual Assault Prevention and Response office has also contracted with an outside organization to evaluate the prevention education both at West Point and the Naval Academy and see what programs work and which ones should be eliminated. That work is expected to be completed within a couple of years.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/17 Jordan crackdown on drug smugglers
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/jordan-crackdown-drug-smugglers-bringing-results-82962481
GIST	<p>AL-WASHASH, Jordan -- The Jordanian military says a crackdown on drug smugglers along the Syrian border is delivering results.</p> <p>During a media tour along the Syrian border on Thursday, Col. Mustafa al-Hiyari said the military was forced into action in response to increased smuggling activity and violence. In January, an army officer was killed in a shootout with smugglers.</p> <p>"Changing the rules of engagement came as a result of changing the nature of the threat. Therefore, the results were decisive," he said.</p> <p>The military says it has killed some 30 smugglers, including 27 people in a single day. Al-Hiyari, director of the army's information directorate, also said large quantities of hashish and 16 million narcotics pills have been seized.</p> <p>He said Syrian authorities have pledged cooperation, but Jordan has seen only limited results. He said in some cases, Syrian police have even cooperated with smugglers along the porous border.</p>

"It did not bear fruit for long periods, which forced us to change the rules of engagement," he said of the Syrian pledges to help.

As he spoke, soldiers stood by and army vehicles could be seen patrolling the border. Al-Hiyari said the mission is also aimed at stopping the shipment of drugs out of Jordan and across the region.

An illegal drug industry has flourished in Syria after 10 years of civil war. In recent years, the Arab Mediterranean country has emerged as a hotspot for making and selling captagon, an illegal amphetamine. Both Syria and neighboring Lebanon have become gateways for the drug to the Middle East, particularly the Gulf.

In September, Syrian and Jordanian officials discussed border security after Syrian government forces captured rebel-held areas along the Jordanian frontier. A month later, Jordan's King Abdullah II spoke with Syrian President Bashar Assad for the first time in a decade after the two countries reopened a key border crossing.

Jordan shares a long porous border with its northern neighbor and is home to more than 650,000 Syrian refugees who fled the civil war.

On Monday, Abdullah visited the area, saluting army personnel and stressing the need to deal firmly with infiltration and smuggling, the Royal Court said.

According to the Jordanian army, the military last year thwarted about 361 infiltration or smuggling attempts and 48 smuggling operations.

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HEADLINE	02/17 Vatican spy story takes center stage in trial
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/vatican-spy-story-takes-center-stage-fraud-trial-82957740
GIST	<p>VATICAN CITY -- The Vatican's big fraud and extortion trial resumes Friday after exposing some unseemly realities of how the Holy See operates, with a new spy story taking center stage that is more befitting of a 007 thriller than the inner workings of a papacy.</p> <p>According to written testimony obtained Thursday, one of Pope Francis' top advisers brought in members of the Italian secret service to sweep his office for bugs and commissioned intelligence reports from them, completely bypassing the Vatican's own police force in the process.</p> <p>The reported actions of Archbishop Edgar Peña Parra, the No. 2 in the Vatican secretariat of state, raise some fundamental questions about the security and sovereignty of the Vatican City State, since he purportedly invited foreign intelligence operatives into the Holy See's inner sanctum, and then outsourced internal Vatican police spy work to them.</p> <p>Peña Parra hasn't been charged with any crime, though his subordinates have. They are among 10 people, including a once-powerful cardinal, on trial in the Vatican criminal tribunal in connection with the Vatican's bungled 350 million euro investment in a London property.</p> <p>In the trial, which resumes Friday, prosecutors have accused the Holy See's longtime money manager, Italian brokers and lawyers of fleecing the pope of tens of millions in fees and of then extorting the Vatican of 15 million euros to finally get full ownership of the property.</p> <p>Peña Parra's role in the scandal has always been anomalous, since he authorized his subordinates to negotiate the final contracts in the deal, and then triggered a suspicious transaction report when he sought a 150-million-euro loan from the Vatican bank to extinguish the mortgage on the property. But prosecutors at least for now have spared him indictment.</p>

The new testimony, reported by the Italian agency adnkronos and “Domani” daily and obtained Thursday by The Associated Press, provides another twist in the affair and underscores the Hollywood levels of intrigue that plague the Vatican and have rarely come to light. Until now.

One of Peña Parra’s former deputies, Vincenzo Mauriello, told prosecutors that in May or June 2019, after the London deal was finalized, Peña Parra told him he wanted to do a security sweep of his office because he believed his private conversations “after a short while were becoming known outside.”

Peña Parra asked if Mauriello if he knew anyone outside the Vatican security apparatus who could do the job and Mauriello said he suggested a friend who worked in Italy’s AISI foreign intelligence service. After a preliminary meeting, the spy, Andrea Tineri, conducted the sweep on a Friday afternoon when few people were in the palazzo, Mauriello testified.

Nothing was found. But Peña Parra then asked Tineri to produce some intelligence dossiers on key figures, Mauriello testified. Tineri and his boss at the AISI presented the findings to Peña Parra, handing over a white envelope in one of their many encounters on Vatican soil, he said.

Adnkronos quoted unnamed Italian intelligence officials as denying Mauriello’s account. But Vatican prosecutors identified Tineri by name in their search warrant as one of Mauriello’s contacts, and said he had visited the Vatican eight times. Vatican prosecutors apparently didn’t realize he was a member of Italy’s foreign intelligence service and that they were identifying and publishing wiretaps of a foreign spy.

That the Vatican and Italy cooperate on security matters is not unusual: Italian police patrol St. Peter’s Square, and there are official levels of cooperation between Vatican gendarmes and Italian law enforcement. But Tineri’s spywork for Peña Parra certainly fell outside official channels, intentionally so. Mauriello recalled that he even had to escort Tineri past the Vatican security booth at one point because the gendarmes were asking too many questions.

Peña Parra, who remains in his day job as the Vatican interior minister, declined to comment Thursday, citing the ongoing trial, his office said. He didn’t refer to Mauriello’s claims in his lengthy defense memo to Vatican prosecutors. But he made it clear that as soon as he arrived at the Vatican in late 2018, he found a series of problematic activities that he sought to clean up, including outrageous spending, intransigent employees and dubious decision-making in the operational headquarters of the Holy See.

It is not the first time the secretariat of state has outsourced intelligence work: Cardinal Angelo Becciu, who was Peña Parra’s predecessor, is on trial in part because he hired a self-styled Sardinian security analyst with purported claims to the Italian intelligence services as a consultant to help negotiate the liberation of Catholic missionary hostages in Africa.

And Pope Francis himself authorized Vatican prosecutors to conduct wiretaps of Italian citizens on Italian soil, in yet another of the sovereignty-defying details of the case.

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HEADLINE	02/18 India: 38 death sentences for bomb blasts
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/indian-court-sentences-38-death-fatal-2008-bombings-82975648
GIST	<p>NEW DELHI -- A court in India on Friday sentenced to death 38 people for a series of bomb blasts in 2008 that left more than 50 dead and 200 wounded in the city of Ahmedabad in Gujarat state, which has a history of violent clashes between Hindus and Muslims.</p> <p>It was the first time that so many accused have received death sentence in a single case in India. The sentence must be confirmed by a higher court.</p> <p>Judge A. R. Patel also sentenced 11 people to life imprisonment in the case in which more than a dozen bombs went off in several parts of Ahmedabad.</p>

Return to Top	<p>A militant Islamic group called Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami claimed responsibility for the bombings. It was considered to be Pakistani-based but apparently is no longer active.</p> <p>The attacks occurred in two waves with explosive devices hidden in lunchboxes and bicycles. The first blast took place near crowded busy shopping centers in Ahmedabad and the second about 20 minutes later in and around hospitals where casualties were being taken.</p> <p>India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi was the chief minister — the top elected official — of Gujarat state at the time.</p> <p>The state has a history of tensions between Hindus and minority Muslims. It was the site of major violence in 2002 that left more than 1,000 people dead. It was triggered by a fire on a train packed with Hindu pilgrims that killed 60 passengers.</p> <p>The cause was never proven, but Hindu extremists blamed the deaths on Muslims and reacted by rampaging through Muslim areas.</p> <p>Patel last week convicted the accused of charges of murder, conspiracy to wage war against the state and illegal possession of arms. He acquitted 28 others for lack of evidence more than 13 years after the bombings killed 56 people on July 26, 2008.</p> <p>The trial was concluded in September.</p>
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